

TRACY BROWER, PhD

Critical Connections

Build Relationships and Harness
the Power of Community
in Work and Life



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Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[Praise for *Critical Connections*](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Introduction](#)

[We're All in This Together](#)

[Paving the Way to Connections](#)

[Note](#)

[Part I : The Power of Connecting](#)

[Chapter 1 : Connecting in the World Today](#)

[Only the Lonely](#)

[The State of Friendship](#)

[Disconnection and the Decline of Mental Health](#)

[Disheartened at Work](#)

[The Damage to Gen Z](#)

[The Decline of Social Skills](#)

[Alarm Bells](#)

[Key Points for Reflection](#)

[Notes](#)

[Chapter 2 : Our Disconnected Reality](#)

[The Elevation of Convenience Over Connection](#)

[Social Media That Isn't Social](#)

[The Bad News About Bad News](#)

[Discontinuity and Overwhelm](#)

[The Negative Narrative About Work](#)

[Onscreen and Exhausted](#)

[Time Poverty](#)

[Lonely or Alone?](#)

[Key Points for Reflection](#)

[Notes](#)

[Chapter 3 : The Positive Impacts of Connection](#)

[The Significance of Relationships](#)

[Health and Happiness](#)

[The Impact of Presence](#)

[Connections Drive Performance](#)

[A Caveat About Density](#)

[Key Points for Reflection](#)

[Notes](#)

[Chapter 4 : The Social Dynamics of Connection and Community](#)

[What We Need from Community](#)

[Behavioral Rules for Communities](#)

[Dirt Roads and Superhighways](#)

[Collective Effervescence and Social Contagion](#)

[Key Points for Reflection](#)

[Notes](#)

[Chapter 5 : Thriving as a Member of a Community](#)

[The Magic of Obligation](#)

[The Matter of Identity](#)

[Birds of a Feather](#)

[Cognitive Biases](#)
[How Trust Is Built](#)
[Key Points for Reflection](#)
[Notes](#)
[Part II : The Practice of Connecting](#)
[Chapter 6 : Thinking as a Good Friend](#)
[Making Your People Your Priority](#)
[Agency and Structure](#)
[How Self-Awareness Drives Interactions](#)
[Comparing Experience and Expectations](#)
[Valuing Time Alone](#)
[Key Points for Reflection](#)
[Notes](#)
[Chapter 7 : Acting as a Good Friend](#)
[Courage and Initiative](#)
[Openness and Humility](#)
[Consistency, Transparency, Authenticity, and Legibility](#)
[The Time It Takes](#)
[Gratitude for Good](#)
[Optimism and Hope](#)
[Key Points for Reflection](#)
[Notes](#)
[Chapter 8 : Interacting as a Good Friend](#)
[Empathy as Foundation](#)
[Increasing Inquiry](#)
[Leaning in and Listening](#)
[The Details of Generosity](#)
[Reciprocity and Its Rewards](#)
[How to Have a Conversation](#)
[Topics That Matter Most](#)
[Healthy Silence](#)
[The Activities of Friendship](#)
[Volunteering](#)
[Key Points for Reflection](#)
[Notes](#)
[Chapter 9 : Where to Find Friends](#)
[The Places You'll Go](#)
[Building Connections at Work](#)
[A Matter of Degree](#)
[Finding Friends in a Digital World](#)
[Key Points for Reflection](#)
[Notes](#)
[Chapter 10 : Making and Maintaining Friends](#)
[Challenges with Friendship](#)
[Maintaining Friendship Through Changes](#)
[Reconnecting with Friends](#)
[Building a Network](#)
[Starting a Friend Group](#)
[Making Friends with Yourself](#)
[Key Points for Reflection](#)
[Notes](#)
[Chapter 11 : Embracing Connections and Community](#)
[Envisioning a Connected Future](#)
[Building Resilience and Developing Perseverance](#)
[Thriving Together](#)

[Notes](#)
[*Acknowledgments*](#)
[*About the Author*](#)
[Index](#)
[End User License Agreement](#)

Praise for *Critical Connections*

“At a time when many feel isolated and overwhelmed, Tracy Brower’s *Critical Connections* offers both hope and direction. Drawing on the science of relationships, she provides practical tools and fresh insight into how intentional connection can help us thrive at work and in life.”

—**Byron Johnson, Ph.D.,**

Distinguished Professor of the Social Sciences, Baylor University, and Co-Director of the Global Flourishing Study

“*Critical Connections* arrives as both a manifesto and a road map. With compelling insight and practical wisdom, Tracy Brower reveals what we’ve always known intuitively but often forget in practice. Whether you’re leading a team, facilitating a community, or simply looking for deeper meaning in your work, this book will change how you think about what’s possible when we stop going at it alone.”

—**Marcus Collins, Ph.D.,**

University of Michigan, and bestselling author of *For the Culture*

“*Critical Connections* offers an invaluable antidote to loneliness and disconnection, with research-based insights into how we can strengthen our bonds and foster meaningful personal growth. Tracy Brower provides practical, accessible guidance for cultivating deeper connections and community, making this a vital resource for anyone seeking greater fulfillment in their relationships at work and in life.”

—**Sara Armbruster,**

Former President and Chief Executive Officer, Steelcase Inc.

“Half of our happiness comes from our social connections and conversely loneliness is literally a killer. This important book shows the absolute necessity of human connection and how to strengthen connections of all types. Everyone who wants a longer, happier, and healthier life needs this book.”

—**Paul J. Zak, Ph.D.,**

Author of *The Little Book of Happiness* and *The Trust Factor*

“At a moment when so many of us feel disconnected, *Critical Connections* is a guide back to one another. Tracy Brower illuminates the science and the soul of friendship, reminding us that belonging is not just nice to have—it’s essential.”

—**Ingrid Fetell Lee,**

Bestselling Author of *Joyful* and Founder of The Aesthetics of Joy

“*Critical Connections* is a timely guide for business leaders navigating the brain economy. Tracy Brower shows how intentional relationships and community are not just human needs, but strategic assets—fueling brain capital, resilience, and long-term competitiveness.”

—**Harris Eyre, MD, Ph.D.,**

Pioneer of the Brain Economy Transition and Professor, Rice University and The University of Texas Medical Branch

“*Critical Connections* reminds us that effective leadership is ultimately about relationships. Tracy Brower brings clear insight and practical guidance to help leaders strengthen trust, communication, and influence—skills every executive and aspiring leader need to succeed.”

—**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.,**

SHRM-SC, President and Chief Executive Officer, SHRM

“At a time when employees are struggling with anxiety and loneliness at work, Tracy Brower’s *Critical Connections* offers a much-needed road map for creating a better life at work through building stronger relationships and communities.”

—**Shalene Gupta,**

Staff Editor, *Fast Company* and author of *The Power of Trust* and *The Cycle*

“In a world of ever-increasing social isolation, Tracy Brower has written an important book to teach, guide, and inspire anyone to build connections to achieve a more rewarding and meaningful life. Anyone looking to increase connections (and that should be all of us!) will gain valuable insights and tools from this book.”

—**Scott Sonenshein, Ph.D.,**

NYT Bestselling Author of *Joy at Work* and *Stretch*, and Professor of Management at Rice University

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**Build Relationships and Harness the Power of Community
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is Available:

ISBN: 9781394362264 (cloth)

ISBN: 9781394362271 (ePub)

ISBN: 9781394362288 (ePDF)

Cover Design: Jon Boylan

Cover Image: © killykoon/ stock.adobe.com

Author Photo: Courtesy of Steelcase

To my family, who are my best friends. And to my friends who are like family to me.

Introduction

We're All in This Together

It's tough these days, and many of us have struggled with uncertainty, overwhelm, disconnection, and loneliness. In fact, over 50% of people ¹ say they're lonely and lack a sense of belonging. We are disengaged and dissatisfied; adrift. Levels of depression and anxiety are at record high levels, globally, and people say their quality of life isn't what they wish it were. Within this reality, connections, community, and friendship are more important than ever, both in work and in life.

A popular bumper sticker says, "If you're not terrified, you're not paying attention." And it's true. With so many people feeling disheartened and downtrodden, it's hard to believe in a positive future or to feel any level of optimism.

But connections are cause for hope. They can be deeply rewarding and also beneficial to our health. Our brains are wired for attachments, and from the earliest ages, we demonstrate empathy toward others. If we're betrayed or left out, we feel pain in the same area of our brains where we feel physical pain. We crave a sense of belonging. This is true whether we're introverts or extroverts. We need each other, we need our people, and we feel a greater sense of meaning and mental health when we're connected.

I've been studying happiness and connections in work and life for decades, and these topics are both critical and compelling. My research began with my exploration of work and life, and I looked deeply at how work is part of a full life. In *Bring Work to Life by Bringing Life to Work*, I explored how to reimagine work-life for better outcomes for people and organizations.

I was moved by the negative narrative about how bad work is. And I examined the alternative: how work can contribute to fulfillment and belonging, even when it is imperfect or difficult. You're likely familiar with the trend toward quiet quitting and the belief that the less work you do, the happier you get. There's an old saying that going to work is like going to the salt mines, so I visited the salt mines of Salzberg, Austria. With all that additional research in mind, I wrote *The Secrets to Happiness at Work*, which describes how we can empower ourselves to create the conditions for joyful experiences, happiness, and well-being in work and life.

Through my research, I gained a comprehensive understanding of not only what it takes to be happy, but also what happiness feels like beyond immediate gratification or superficial experiences. Friendship, community, and belonging are foundational and pivotal to the experience of joy. People are our lifeblood, and our connections make or break our health and happiness.

But in the face of this critical priority for friendship, it's a rare day that goes by without a new study or another headline about how people are lonely, depressed, and anxious. As a senior contributor for *Forbes* and a contributor to *Fast Company* and other publications, I've written many of those headlines myself. But today's most pressing issues require us to collaborate in new ways and come to solutions that we can only reach through mutual effort, so our relationships are fundamental.

Early in my career, I saw examples of mutual effort when I facilitated team building activities. One of my favorites was called Five Square. Groups of five people were seated at tables. Each person received an envelope with puzzle pieces, and the goal was for each person in the five-person group to have a perfect square in front of them at the end of the time. Participants had to reach the outcome without speaking.

The trick in the activity was that no one had the necessary puzzle pieces in their individual packet, and group members had to exchange pieces to create five squares. For the whole team to succeed, at least one person in the group had to see everyone's problem. Once that occurred, the sharing of pieces and collaboration could begin in earnest. Mutual effort requires us to see, empathize, connect, and collaborate. And the more intense the challenge, the more necessary the community effort.

Or consider the cartoon with four people in a canoe. There's a hole in one end of the canoe and two members of the group are bailing water furiously. In the other end of the canoe, one guy says to the other, "I'm glad the hole is in their end!"

These are trivial examples, but sometimes it's easier to see big things through smaller lenses. And life can be represented in microcosms. We're in this together, and we all need to see each other's challenges and recognize that our success will be based on coming together and working toward shared solutions.

Paving the Way to Connections

This book is intended to make the case for our collective experience, pave the way for us to create and sustain connections, and to inspire us to move forward.

[Part I](#) of this book will look at the power of connecting. If you're going on a hike, you must know the terrain, the elevation, the distance, the temperature, and the weather conditions so you know which boots to wear and how much water to take along. Understanding the problem is like this, because when we understand what we face, we empower ourselves to deal with it most effectively. So in [Chapter 1](#), we'll start by exploring the scope of the problem and the scale of the challenges we face. We'll look at the research about just how bad things are, and the ways that we are struggling. From how many friends people have (or don't) to which groups suffer the most with a lack of friends, we'll unpack the problem. We'll also look at how loneliness and mental health are related and understand factors that have driven the declines in mental health. We'll address the role of work in loneliness, as well as the generational differences in the experience of loneliness. We'll also explore the deterioration of social skills and the concept of social jetlag.

After we understand the scope of the problem, and its terrain, [Chapter 2](#) will investigate our disconnected reality. We'll look at the ways convenience has overshadowed connection and how social media creates barriers to healthy relationships. We'll talk about the reality of overwhelm and the unhelpful stories about work that exacerbate the issues we face. We'll also address how we spend our time, and the issues of time scarcity that contribute to our malaise. And we'll explore the differences between being alone and being lonely.

[Chapter 3](#) will cover the positive impact of community and connections, and even how our brains contribute to our decisions about others. We'll look at fascinating research on the power of presence and its effects on health, happiness, and performance. We'll dig into the compelling impact of being in proximity with others, and effects not only on individuals, but also on groups. We'll explore how connections at work matter and offer some caveats about density and the number of friends we have.

In [Chapter 4](#), we'll look at how community and connections operate. We'll explore what we need from our communities as well as the rules that sustainable communities require. We'll talk about social capital and the dynamics of social contagion as we influence each other through relationships.

In [Chapter 5](#), we'll explore the ways obligation and responsibility contribute positively to our experience. We'll also look at how relationships influence our identities. This chapter will examine our preferences for people who are more like us, balanced with the benefits of diversity in our networks. And we'll look at cognitive biases and how they shape both our perceptions and our relationships.

[Part II](#) of this book will shift to an action orientation with the practice of connecting. In [Chapter 6](#), we'll address how to be a good friend, including consideration for our own thinking, framing, and perception, and how these shape our experiences of friendship. From self-awareness and expectations to time alone, we'll start with ourselves.

In [Chapter 7](#), we'll continue exploring how to be a good friend in terms of our choices and actions. We'll look at initiative, openness, and humility as well as consistency, legibility, and the time it takes to make a friend. We'll address both gratitude and optimism and their role in relationships.

In [Chapter 8](#), we'll also look at interactions, and how they shape friendship. We'll address empathy, inquiry, listening, generosity, reciprocity, and the art of conversation, and activities to create common experiences, shared language, and enhanced friendships.

Next, in [Chapter 9](#), we'll look at where to find friends and the special circumstances of friendships at work. And we'll wrestle with how we nurture friendships in a digital age.

In [Chapter 10](#), we'll explore challenges with friendship including how to avoid bad friends and how to deal with conflict. We'll also look at how to maintain friendships even when lives change. And we'll discuss how to reconnect with old friends and why you should. We'll dig into how you can build a network and start a friend group as well as how to make friends with yourself.

Chapter 11 will provide perspectives on how we move forward, build resilience, and foster perseverance to thrive in a hopeful future of connections, community, and friendship.

In this book, you'll gain an understanding of the dynamics of community and how it works. You'll also take away a wide variety of strategies you can put into action to find fulfillment and happiness through friendship. But this book isn't a self-help guide, and you won't find quick fixes or easy recipes. Instead, you'll want to marinate in the information, reflect on all that's here, and personalize for yourself. You'll enhance community and friendships by making the information your own and continuously acting with intention and seeking to grow over time.

There's an old saying, "Beauty is as beauty does," but I think we can adjust it to "Friendship is as friendship does." We can understand the challenges and the dynamics of friendship and behave in ways that foster, nurture, and enhance connections. Through these actions, we'll be able to create connections and enhance our bonds and belonging in ways that will enrich and sustain us as individuals and in community with our people.

You'll notice that I use the word "we" throughout this book. I've taken this approach not because we're all the same, but because we share experiences. We'll talk a lot about social dynamics and discuss the nuances of connectedness, so "we" feels apt. And I believe it makes the concepts and research feel more accessible. "We" also reinforces our mutuality, and the similarity of some of our experiences can catalyze lessons learned and clarify implications for the future.

You'll also notice that I've mixed personal examples of struggles, challenges, and community with examples in a work context. This is because work is such a central part of life for so many of us. It's a place where we make contributions, feel seen, and form relationships. It's for this reason that it feels right to talk not only about the personal, but also the vocational in considering our connections. And all the names are pseudonyms except one, where I've identified Abigail with her first and last name.

And it must also be said that this book was written by me, a human, with no portion written by AI.

Note

1. Murthy, Vivek H. "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community," 2023. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>.

Part I
The Power of Connecting

Chapter 1

Connecting in the World Today

“We are all dependent on one another, every soul of us on earth.”

~George Bernard Shaw, *The Devil's Disciple*

Only the Lonely

If you're lonely, you're not alone. In fact, fully 50% of U.S. adults feel lonely. ¹ And loneliness is terrible for our physical, mental, and emotional health. We are increasingly disconnected, dissatisfied, and disengaged, and this manifests itself in record-breaking levels of depression, anxiety, and suicide at all ages.

The stats about our discontent are sobering, but we must start with a clear-eyed look at our peril and our challenges, so we can understand them fully enough to develop solutions and get through to the other side. As the saying goes, “If you're walking through a swamp, it's best to just keep going.” Things are tough, but we're wise to look around, accept reality, and determine how we can improve it and persevere.

And while the pandemic seems very much in our rear-view mirror, the residual impacts remain. In particular, the pandemic has been blamed for increasing loneliness, based on the collapse of social connections. Research ² found that 30% of people were lonely during the pandemic, which was an increase compared to pre-pandemic experiences.

But loneliness and mental health issues reach far beyond the pandemic. Multiple additional studies find that loneliness is alarmingly high. One national survey ³ of almost 10,500 adults found that 61% said they felt lonely. This was a 7% increase compared with 2018.

In addition, another study ⁴ found 36% of people said they felt lonely frequently or almost all the time, and the number was even higher, 61%, for those ages 18–25. In addition, 51% of mothers with young children said they were lonely frequently or almost all the time. Loneliness was exacerbated during the pandemic when social connections dissolved, but this data shows that loneliness has increased substantially in recent years as well.

Broad swaths of people suffer with loneliness, and while it is widespread, it is also concentrated in key groups. In fact, the issue of loneliness is especially concerning among college students. A comprehensive survey of 33,000 students ⁵ found that about 67% of students said they were lonely or felt isolated. This is an all-time high. Students in the study aren't just lonely, they are also *more lonely* than they've ever been. And we can see the tie between loneliness and mental health with 83% of students who reported their mental health had a negative effect on their academic performance during the past month. Loneliness is affecting students substantially, and isolation is a regular part of their lives.

Older adults are also struggling. A 2024 study ⁶ found similarly concerning results. In particular, 33% of older adults ages 50–80 were lonely. While this was the average rate among all respondents, there were factors that exacerbated loneliness. For example, this study showed a link between mental health and loneliness. When respondents said their mental health was only fair or poor, 75% of them also said they were lonely.

In addition, there was a link with physical health. Specifically, 53% of those who said their physical health was fair or poor were also more likely to be lonely. Another factor affecting loneliness was engagement in work. In fact, 52% who didn't work (either those who were receiving disability or who were retired) were lonely. Significantly, the rates of loneliness were double compared to the older adults with better physical and mental health and those who were working.

And like the stats about the students, the data isn't just significant on its own, it also shows that each of these percentages had increased compared to 2018 data. Like students, older adults aren't just lonely, they are *more lonely* than they've been before. The study also found there were additional factors that affected loneliness. Specifically, those who earned less and lived alone were more likely to report higher levels of loneliness.

The overall data on loneliness was reinforced in another study. ⁷ Among 3,000 people, 35% of those over age 45 were lonely. But the study also pointed to the importance of community. It looked at embeddedness by exploring whether people had moved recently. The hypothesis was that if respondents had just moved into a neighborhood or city, they would be less likely to have established connections. Not surprisingly, 45% of those who had lived at their current residence less than a year were lonely. This was a higher number than those who hadn't recently moved.

For loneliness, it also matters tremendously how we interact and the extent to which we feel like we can talk, connect, or dialogue with others. In the study, among those who were lonely, 13% said they were having fewer deep conversations, compared with 6% of those who weren't lonely.

Feeling connected and interacting regularly can be a feature of our relationships with friends and coworkers, but also with a spouse. And the study found that marriage acted to mitigate loneliness. Only 29% of those who were married reported they were lonely compared with 51% who had never been married. Having a person to spend time with and interact with regularly tends to reduce loneliness.

Income levels were also related to loneliness. The data showed that those with higher incomes were less likely to be lonely compared to those with lower incomes. In addition, those who were more involved in activities like religious events, volunteer opportunities, or community organizations were less likely to be lonely. Even spending time on a hobby reduced the incidence of loneliness. The factors of income and activity levels may be related, as those with greater discretionary

income are probably more likely to have transportation to attend the club meetings, pay for pickle ball lessons, or go out with friends.

The State of Friendship

Activities and hobbies have positive effects on feelings of connection, and so does spending time with friends. So, what is the status of friendship today? Does the current state of friendship help with loneliness?

Unfortunately not. With so much loneliness, it's not surprising that people don't have as many friends as they used to. And when they're in need, people may not turn to friends as much as in prior decades.

In 1990, about a quarter of people in another study ⁸ reported that a friend was the first person they went to when they had a personal problem. But by 2021, only 16% turned to friends first, and instead turned to parents, siblings, or family members. ⁹ Notably, younger people are more likely to turn to friends first, with 25% of those between the ages of 18–29 who turn to friends first in times of trouble.

When you have problems, being able to rely on someone you trust is vital. If you're able to get support from family, that's great. But this data shows people may have fewer friends they can lean on. The lack of a support network or a feeling that we don't have our people can leave us feeling unmoored, bereft, and lonely.

People also report they have few *close* friends today. Only about half of Americans, 53%, report they have between one and four close friends and only 38% say they have five or more friends. Fully 8% of people say they have no close friends. This is an increase compared to only 3% who said they had no close friends in 1990. ¹⁰ Friendship is eroding, both in terms of the number of friends we have and the nature of the relationships.

Fully 59% say they do have a best friend. This may seem encouraging, but it leaves 40% who do not. And again, the data is sobering when we consider it today but especially compared to where we used to be. In 1990, 75% of people said they had a best friend. ¹¹

Should you have a best friend? Yes, certainly. A best friend is someone who knows you well and who appreciates you even when they understand your flaws. A best friend is the person you can call when you're really down or when you're celebrating a wonderful accomplishment. They'll be with you in the valleys and cheer you on enthusiastically when you succeed. A best friend helps you feel seen and supported, and these are fundamental both to individual well-being and to social bonds across groups and societies.

In addition to overall data on friendship, it's also possible to look at patterns of relationships and see which groups are struggling most with friendship. In fact, the younger that people are, the more likely they are to say they have few close friends. Only 32% of those who are younger than 30 say they have five or more close friends. This is compared with 34% of those ages 30–49, 40% of those ages 50–64, and 49% of those over age 65. ¹² There is clear correlation between age and number of friends.

Another pattern in friendship is gender. Men's friendships have declined more than women's over the past decades. In 1990, 55% of men said they had at least six close friends, but by 2021, only 27% said the same. In addition, the number of men who say they have no close friends is up to 15%, which is five times more than men who said the same in 1990. ¹³

Men are also less likely to report they get emotional support from friends. In fact, only 20% of men get support from friends compared with 40% of women. And men are less likely to share personal feelings related to their problems, with 30% of men compared to 47% of women who share feelings. Men are also less likely to tell a friend they love them. Only 25% of men compared with 49% of women have proclaimed their love to a friend. ¹⁴

Common opinion has always held that men and women relate to each other differently. Men, we're told, tend to interact around activities rather than spending time in deep conversation. But regardless of pattern style, or bias in our beliefs, the data about the decline of friendship is especially significant for men.

Lack of friendships and loneliness may also be related to broader social values and approaches. In fact, a cultural emphasis on independence matters. Specifically, a penchant for autonomy has been linked with feelings of loneliness. One study ¹⁵ looked at 46,000 people between the ages of 16 and 99 in 237 countries. The researchers concluded that people who were in societies that were more individualistic, compared with those that were more collectivist, tended to report greater levels of loneliness. This was especially true among those who were younger and male.

The time you spend with others is a significant driver of friendship and intimacy. When you spend more time with people, you build relationships with them. But in studies of how we spend our time, people are spending more time alone and significantly less time with friends, coworkers, children, or family.

Since 2010, the average hours per day that people spent alone was less than four hours. But in 2023, that number had risen to an average of eight hours per day spent alone. And in a telling pattern, time with friends, coworkers, children, or family has dropped to less than an hour a day on average. ¹⁶

The time we spend with others has eroded, and this has negative effects on the number of friends we have, how close we feel to others, and the extent to which we are embedded in a support network. It's a pattern that has significant negative implications for loneliness and mental health.

Friendship is also related to satisfaction with life. When people have more friends, they say they are more satisfied. With less friends they report lower satisfaction. The relationship is linear. Having more friends translates into greater satisfaction in a predictable pattern. ¹⁷

A similar finding ¹⁸ demonstrated that 42% of people don't feel as close to their friends as they would like, and they experience reduced satisfaction. And 62% of people reported they don't feel connected to their community. ¹⁹ This too translates into lower levels of satisfaction.

Disconnection and the Decline of Mental Health

People are struggling with loneliness, friendship, and mental health. But why is there such a strong relationship between these?

It has everything to do with belonging and our fundamental human needs for togetherness. Overall, if we lack a sense of belonging or connection, we are more likely to feel depressed. ²⁰ The need for connection is significant. We deeply desire relationships, and we also experience pain when we don't have the necessary interactions.

One study ²¹ found that not only do we crave relationships with others, but we experience this craving in the same parts of our brains where we feel physical desires. Studies found that isolation was associated with obesity and nicotine addictions. But with a return to social interaction, there was a reduced experience of craving for food or nicotine, according to another study. ²²

So we crave belonging, and in addition, if we experience exclusion from others, we feel the pain in the same parts of our brains where we experience physical pain. ²³ This is true in many contexts but has also been studied in the work environment. One research effort ²⁴ found that when employees experience ostracism at work, it can result in a decline in both job satisfaction and health.

We are wired for connection and relationships, and we have a neurological response to these. The field of social neuroscience examines how our brains change based on social interactions. And this reality is apparent in brain patterns that shift when we're lonely.

One study ²⁵ used MRIs to track brain patterns while people thought about themselves and then when they thought about their close friends, acquaintances, and celebrities. The closer the relationships, the more similarity there was in the brain patterns of thinking about the self, compared to thinking about others. But when people were lonely, the brain patterns weren't as similar to the self-thinking patterns, indicating that loneliness produces a perception of distance, dislocation, and disconnection from others.

Differences in neurological patterns were also evident in additional research ²⁶ that used MRI testing. The research determined that when lonely people interact socially, they have less activation in the parts of their brain associated with rewards. So social interaction doesn't feel as good when people are lonely.

It's a vicious circle. When people are lonely, interactions can help, activating feelings of reward and positive mood. But if we're lonely, our brain chemistry may hamper the experience of happiness or satisfaction. With reduced reward for the experience, we'll be less motivated to repeat it and wind up more alone and isolated.

Compellingly, there is a clear connection with loneliness and mental health. Distance and disconnection are rife, half of us are lonely, and mental health is deteriorating. Studies ²⁷ show that loneliness causes depression, and it creates neurobiological changes. Specifically, feeling social isolated impairs executive functioning (think: judgment and decision-making), sleep, mental well-being, and physical health. These in turn increase morbidity and mortality.

The degradation of mental health is nothing short of shocking. One research effort ²⁸ looked at 60 different studies on mental health across the globe, covering more than 226,000 people. Taken together, 24% of people reported depression and more than 21% reported anxiety. That's one in four people who suffered with depression and one in five who struggled with anxiety. The effects were related to the social distancing and isolation that was a response to the pandemic, but the study's authors suggested these effects should also be considered their own current epidemic. ²⁹

Our instinct when we are in trouble is to band together, gather with our people, and protect the group. This is known by anthropologists as *mutualism*. We believe there is safety in numbers, and we value unity and loyalty to the group.

Mutualism is evident even in this unexpected example: When we were visiting Roatan, Honduras, one of our favorite vacation spots, my husband and our son went on a midnight snorkel to see sharks. Each person in the amateur group was given a tin can with some coins in it. They were told to use it as a noise maker if they saw a predatory fish. (This wasn't a method that inspired confidence!) But the snorkelers were also instructed to swim together in a group if they saw a shark.

Among fish, this strategy apparently works. When smaller fish swim together, they confuse a piranha into believing he is seeing a larger creature. Apparently, many types of predator fish don't have terrific visual acuity, so when they see a large shadow, they assume it's another big fish and leave it alone. Luckily, it worked for my husband and our son. But it speaks at a deeper level to our instinct to stick together under threat.

As we seek to band together in times of stress, there's also a new trend on social media called *body doubling*. People who have trouble concentrating or who struggle with stress or anxiety ask a friend to stay with them while they're working. Or virtually, people will work together with an open chat or an open camera, so they can check in with each other regularly and feel the presence of their friend or coworker. Like the buddy system, the friend's role is to support and offer comfort through their presence.

And some of us will remember swimming at summer camp and the instruction to never go into the water without a buddy. Partway through swimming time, counselors would call for a buddy check when you had to raise hands with your person to show everyone was paired up, safe, and accounted for. Banding together, working in tandem, and supporting each other through hard times are certainly examples of this kind of social care.

Our brain chemistry has a role to play in our desire to be together. Oxytocin is released with physical touch and also when we spend time with trusted friends and family. And it is evident in childbirth, breastfeeding, and sex. Its release produces feelings of calm, happiness, and well-being.

Oxytocin also drives a preference to protect others who are similar to us and to come together for the good of the group. When people felt danger or threat during the pandemic, and they weren't able to fulfill the instinct to come together, it produced feelings of discontinuity and mismatch, and therefore greater anxiety and mental health challenges. Today, as we work and interact at a distance, the disconnection continues, along with the cycle of discontent and emotional challenges.

Another study ³⁰ reinforces the case that social disconnection makes us distant from each other and therefore lonely. The research assessed more than 3,000 adults in the U.S. in a longitudinal analysis. It explored whether people were socially disconnected by examining numbers of social contacts and frequency of interaction. It also assessed people's levels of loneliness and the extent to which they felt supported, along with their levels of depression and anxiety.

Researchers found that when people were more socially disconnected, they experienced greater feelings of isolation and in turn, they had higher levels of both depression and anxiety. The relationship between these also went in the other direction. When people were more depressed or anxious, they tended to feel more isolated, and they were less likely to connect socially with others. Another survey ³¹ reinforced this finding. Fully 63% of respondents said they suffered with mental health problems because they had a lack of social connection. And 57% said it was because they feel isolated.

Loneliness is related to mental health issues, and likewise, mental health issues are related to loneliness. The two reinforce and exacerbate each other. Another research effort ³² studied almost 2,000 people and their experience of loneliness. They found that 27% were struggling with feeling isolated and alone. And when people were clinically depressed or weren't able to manage their emotions, they were more likely to also report feeling lonely.

The study also identified factors that affected depression and loneliness. Similar to the research we mentioned earlier in which certain demographics affected loneliness, this study found that when people were younger, separated or divorced, or reported poor-quality sleep, they tended to also report greater loneliness. On the other hand, when they had more social support, were married or cohabitating, these factors tended to mitigate the experience of loneliness.

Empathy is critical to understanding others and feeling connected, and it too has declined. A meta-analysis ³³ examined 72 different studies covering 30 years and found that empathy has dropped by 40% over the years of comparisons. We feel lonely when it seems like no one is around to support us, but we also feel lonely when we fail to identify with others.

Strikingly, our need for social connection is so significant, that it is evident in physical health outcomes. ³⁴ Having strong social relationships and a few good friends reduces the risk of death by 50%. Social relationships are more influential for health than factors like obesity or physical activity. And having a few close friends affects health about as much as smoking or drinking habits, according to a variety of studies. ³⁵ In addition to longevity, the research has also found that the nature of our relationships is correlated with heart disease, blood pressure, cancer, dementia, susceptibility to viruses and respiratory illnesses, and mental health. ³⁶

In another survey, ³⁷ loneliness was correlated with health as well. Only 25% of those who said their health was excellent reported they were lonely. But when people said their health was poor, 55% said they were also lonely.

Disheartened at Work

We've talked about the rise of loneliness and the reduction of friendship. In addition, we've discussed the links between loneliness and mental health as well as the importance of friends and community for well-being. Now, let's turn to a discussion of work, because it's a key nexus for relationships. And it has a large bearing on our feelings of connection, or disconnection.

For 76% of people, work is one of the primary places they make friends. ³⁸ But this connection point is eroding. In fact, people largely don't believe others care about them at work. One study ³⁹ found that only 38% of people thought that colleagues cared about them, down from 47% in 2020. In addition, 68% of people said they felt they knew their coworkers on a personal level. While this doesn't seem so bad, another study ⁴⁰ showed there has been a decline since 2019, when 79% felt they knew their coworkers.

In addition, the data ⁴¹ found that 43% don't feel connected with their coworkers at all. And 22% said they don't have a friend at work. But do people want improved relationships with coworkers? Yes, based on 69% who say they are unsatisfied with their social connections at work.

Even if you're not BFFs (best friends forever) with your colleagues, you want to be seen and feel a sense of community in the workplace. Data from another survey ⁴² reinforces this finding, with 55% of people in that survey saying they lack connection with coworkers and 58% who say they don't feel connected with their company.

The survey also links loneliness, mental health, and well-being. It found that when people felt disconnected from colleagues, they were 49% more stressed, 78% more burned out, 107% more anxious, and 128% more lonely.

Distance may also impact negatively on career advancement as well. Another survey ⁴³ found that people who worked away from the office were 31% less likely to get a promotion. This is corroborated by data, ⁴⁴ which found that people who didn't work in the office were 24% less likely to receive a promotion. It seems logical: Promotions are often based on relationships with leaders and colleagues who can recommend and advocate for your advancement, and if they don't know you as well, they won't be as likely to take actions to help your career.

Work is a place to come together, collaborate on projects, and make friends. But today's work experience isn't always a source of connection.

The Damage to Gen Z

In addition to considering the context of work, generations are also a lens to understanding the experience of loneliness. We talked earlier about the fact that younger people are more lonely and have fewer close relationships with friends, but the problem is so significant, it's necessary to dig in a little more.

Gen Z (those born in 1997 through 2012) is tremendously stressed and suffering. A nationwide survey [45](#) found that 91% of Gen Zs felt stress and 98% felt burned out. Another survey [46](#) reported that among those ages 18–34, 62% of women and 51% of men were completely overwhelmed by stress.

To go along with their general stress, 71% of Gen Zs say they are evaluating their life priorities. While this kind of reflection is certainly healthy, 34% of Gen Zs report they have worries about the future. They're concerned about many issues, but top among these were apprehensions about a lack of jobs and lack of learning opportunities.

We've talked about the role of work and people's desires to be connected to colleagues, and Gen Z also has priorities for health and positive work experiences. Unfortunately, they're not necessarily getting these needs met.

In the face of their worry and stress, Gen Z is focusing especially on well-being. Fully 78% of Gen Zs say that their well-being is just as essential as their salary according to a survey. [47](#) And additional data [48](#) reinforces this, with 82% of Gen Zs who say they value well-being as a top priority in their work.

In an added view of their unmet needs, another survey [49](#) found Gen Z wants meaning from work, with 37% saying it's primary and 12% who want to make a positive impact. But 25% said that when they are working, they aren't fully engaged, even if they are physically present. Fully 48% said that work feels transactional, because they don't feel a bond with their colleagues. [50](#)

There's a lot of press today about what Gen Z is demanding from employers. The oldest Gen Zs graduated from college in 2019, so even those at the older edge of the generation have little experience with a traditional approach to work. They don't have a reference point for going into an office each day and working side-by-side with colleagues. Perhaps this is what drives the myth that Gen Zs want to work exclusively from home and avoid coming into an office.

Despite the narrative and even with their absence of experience, they want to work collaboratively. In fact, Gen Zs reported [51](#) that the factor they need most in order to thrive is an environment that includes collaboration and teamwork. And 78% view work as a significant place to create social connections, community, and a sense of belonging. This sense of connection is a top priority for 62% of Gen Zs, along with 62% who also highly value family and relationships. [52](#)

Ultimately, the generational lens provides guidance on where we should look to understand the biggest problems with connection and community and how we must support the generations to move toward better and more rewarding relationships.

The Decline of Social Skills

Exacerbating the issues of connections across generations, social skills are atrophying. As people are less connected, they are interacting less, and skills tend to wane. And when skills wane, confidence does as well, causing people to avoid social situations. It's a damaging cycle.

Fully 37% of people say they lack communication skills. [53](#) In addition, people lack confidence in interacting and relating. In another survey, [54](#) 20% reported that they are both anxious and self-conscious. In addition, 18% say they feel awkward, 13% say they are overwhelmed or uncomfortable in social settings, 11% say they are apprehensive, and 2% say they are terrified when they are in social situations.

It can indeed be scary. A room full of strangers can be overpowering and moments to mingle or make small talk can seem daunting. Social skills are like a muscle, and when people aren't using them as much, they can deteriorate. It's *social jet lag*.

The locations that people work also play a role in their level of confidence with social skills, because work is a source of interactions. When people do their jobs remotely, 25% of them say they experience a decline in their social skills. Those who also live alone and those who are Millennials have had the greatest declines in their skills, according to the survey. [55](#)

People also grapple [56](#) with the specific mechanics of interactions. For example, 27% reported that they had trouble making small talk. In addition, 18% weren't sure how to start a conversation. Another 16% said they had a difficult time maintaining eye contact, and 15% struggled to carry on a conversation or be part of a group discussion.

Another of the mechanics of social skills is the ability to read and recognize emotions in others. According to research, [57](#) when people were better at expressing their own emotions, they could read others' reactions more quickly. The opposite was also true. When people were less confident expressing their own emotions, they had more uncertainty in reading others' as well. There was a reciprocal relationship between expressing and recognizing emotions.

Speed is a factor as well. When people show facial expressions more immediately, they are also better able to recognize emotions in others. [58](#) They can therefore mirror, empathize, and relate more effectively.

This is relevant as we consider the self-awareness that is fundamental to *EQ*, or the *emotional quotient* in relating with others. Higher levels of personal consciousness and connection with the self tend to positively impact connections with others.

The decline in our social skills and our difficulties in relating and interacting are linked with more stress, greater loneliness, and declines in physical health as well. ⁵⁹ People who don't feel like they understand others or relate to them may feel less connected, more detached, and pay the price in terms of mental health and loneliness. But when people are more confident and capable with their social skills, they experience greater well-being and even success in their careers. ⁶⁰

Alarm Bells

It's critical to say that there is no judgment toward people who are lonely, disconnected, stressed, lacking confidence with social skills, or struggling with mental health. In fact, these are all signals that something is wrong at a community and social level. Like a fever, they point to issues with our patterns of living and relating, that demand a response.

Unfortunately, we tend to define these issues at the individual level and seek to solve them on our own. We privatize our pain. But these are collective problems, and they require shared solutions. Rather than concluding that something is wrong with the person who suffers, it is necessary to honor the pain and consider the broader issues that get in the way of connectedness, so we can work toward solutions.

It's a rough road we're on, but by understanding the conditions, we can prepare for the journey and support each other to get through to the other side.

Key Points for Reflection

Here are important ideas to keep in mind from this chapter.

- Loneliness is significant for people throughout our society and communities.
- We have seen declines in mental health based on disconnection from each other.
- Loneliness is pervasive in many contexts including within our workplaces.
- Gen Z has been hit especially hard in terms of loneliness, disconnection, and mental health.
- Social skills have declined.
- Today's issues are alarm bells that alert us to the need for empathy, responses, and solutions.

In the next chapter we'll turn to a discussion of our disconnected reality and the dynamics that are contributing to our loneliness and mental health issues.

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Chapter 2

Our Disconnected Reality

“The worst solitude is to be destitute of sincere friendship.”

~Frances Bacon

The Elevation of Convenience Over Connection

So how did we get here, and how do we make sense of the problem? Knowing the origins of the issues is critical to understanding how we might get back to a place of connection, community, and friendship. There are a number of factors that matter to our current experience.

First, technology has a role to play, because it has shifted our behavior and reduced our need to rely on each other for even the most insignificant tasks.

We've elevated convenience over connection. We don't talk to the barista. Instead, we order on the app. And we don't chat with the checkout person, because the delivery comes to our door. Even when we order from the food delivery service, we can check the box to “leave it at the door” rather than “hand it to me.” The app allows us to provide a tip, and we've acknowledged our delivery person with a few bucks, but we've eliminated the experience of a smile or a literal word of thanks.

Of course, our use of technology has upsides. We can be more efficient, and we can invest time in things that are arguably more fulfilling than consuming a few extra minutes placing our coffee order or driving to the store. You can think of this as the elimination of *friction*. Things are easy, and we don't have to stand in lines or make small talk with the person running the check-out lane.

But without friction, we miss out on conversation, laughs, or even new insights or opportunities for friendship. Superficial interactions are an opportunity for serendipity in which you have the potential to get an unexpected surprise like meeting someone from your hometown or running into someone with a great idea or a new perspective.

Data suggests that superficial interactions add to our quality of life. It turns out that chatting with the person at the bubble tea shop is more rewarding than you might think.

Specifically, superficial interactions tend to generate positive feelings. A study ¹ put people into a couple of experimental circumstances to test the effects of conversation in public and superficial situations. In the first experiment, people were instructed to either talk to someone during their commute on the train or the bus or to avoid engaging with others. In situations where people connected with others, they had a more positive experience compared to when they remained disconnected.

The study also included an experiment in which people in a waiting room were instructed to talk to others. Then, they were asked about their reactions to the experience. Whether they were instructed to talk to others or whether they were simply the recipient of the communication from others, they reported more positive reactions than if they sat alone with no interaction.

A nuance of these experiments is that people were asked whether they expected to have positive reactions to interactions with others. They didn't. In fact, they expected that they would not enjoy interacting, and they expected that others would similarly want to avoid interaction. But in both cases, they were wrong. They underestimated their own positive reactions, and they also underestimated others' preferences to interact.

This misalignment of our expectations, and how we can be wrong about what others want, is known as a *collective illusion* or *pluralistic ignorance*. We expect others to have certain preferences, and these expectations guide our own behaviors. When we're wrong about other's desires for interaction, we're causing ourselves distance and disconnection, and foisting it on others as well. We would benefit instead from reaching out to each other more often.

Social Media That Isn't Social

Social media also has a role to play in our distance from each other. It has changed the way we communicate, making our interactions less rewarding or fulfilling. It has also exacerbated social anxiety, and it has replaced face-to-face interaction.

To make matters worse, social media also causes challenges with our mental health in terms of overwhelm and negative experiences. And this is a vicious circle. When we feel upset, we can't bring our best to relationships, and we may find it challenging to connect with others. This in turn causes us to retreat into social media instead of real-life relationships, and so on.

Social media is linked with all kinds of negative outcomes, from loneliness and neuroticism to reduced quality in our communication with others and reduced attention spans. In particular, use of social media is linked with increases in loneliness. One study ² found that when adolescents spent more time on social media, they experienced greater levels of perceived social isolation (PSI), which is in turn associated with greater morbidity and mortality.

On the other hand, research on undergraduates ³ found that when participants spent less time on Facebook, Instagram, or Snapchat, they experienced less loneliness and depression. The results were evident in only three weeks, when they limited

their use to 10 minutes per day.

Social media is also related to neuroticism. The relationship is bi-directional. The more people use social media, the more neurotic they become. And the more neurotic people are, the more likely they are to spend time on social media. The studies ⁴ also found that when people spend more time on social media, they have lower levels of both honesty and humility.

In addition, social media has changed the way we communicate. Instead of having deeper conversations that include the opportunity to ask questions, push back, discuss more deeply, and share nuances of our beliefs, we are communicating more superficially and without as much opportunity to really examine and explore others' opinions, or even our own.

Communication on social media is also largely one-way and more broadcast oriented. You're posting your opinions, and someone else may respond with a like or a share, or they might declare their opinion. But for the most part, we're not asking questions, listening, or experiencing a conversational exchange.

Research also shows that over time our attention spans have declined. In one experiment, those who spent more time on smart phones demonstrated greater hyperactivity, impulsiveness, inattention, and social worry. In a numerical processing test, they also performed with reduced accuracy compared to those who used smart phones less. ⁵

Socially, we're also spending less time on any one topic, suggesting reduced attention. A longitudinal study investigated the topics that were popular in books, publications, movies, Google, Twitter, Reddit, and Wikipedia spanning the years 1900 through 2018. The findings ⁶ demonstrated that collectively, people focus for less time on any single topic, and there is greater speed at which topics capture our interest.

A reduced capacity to focus and pay attention is worrying, because our ability to solve problems requires us to go deep, understand issues, examine variables, explore potential solutions, and experiment to find the right responses. If we can't focus, we can't resolve issues effectively, either individually or as a society.

We may also be shortening our gratification horizon. This is the time we expect to invest before we experience a positive feeling from our effort. When we have a longer gratification horizon, we can focus, invest effort, and achieve payoffs of longer-term goals. But shortened attention spans can result in a sense that things should all happen immediately. This can get in the way of success, because many of the best rewards require a longer-term investment. Years of education pay off in getting a job you love. Or time in a relationship develops a fulfilling partnership. Or a commitment to parenting fosters a rewarding family life.

There are also more highs and lows in terms of what we pay attention to, respond to, or share. The study ⁷ also found a correlation between how much information is produced and our reactions. The more information there is and the more novel it is, the more it exhausts our ability to give attention to any one thing. This leaves us jumping from one topic to another and feeling flooded and fatigued.

In addition, people may believe that online channels are effective platforms to build relationships. But in fact, friendship online tends to be superficial. When asked to consider where they've made true friends, only 8% of respondents say they've made a close friend online. ⁸

Social media is like empty calories. While you may love candy corn or red licorice, if you eat it for all your meals, your health will decline, because candy can't provide the necessary nutrients. With social media, you may have thousands of friends or hundreds of followers but lack relationships with people you can call when you're facing an emergency or when you have an urgent need for help. This is especially damaging because getting likes, responses, or engagement on posts releases dopamine in the brain. The feel-good chemical can fool us into thinking we're popular and supported. But in actuality, there's no one to rely on when we need a shoulder to cry on.

Another challenge with social media is that it feeds us a steady diet of information that already agrees with our own thinking. The algorithms work too well, and we see a narrow field of information. We're unlikely to see opinions that differ from our own. This causes us to be more insular in our perspectives and removes the healthy social experience of engaging with others to learn new things, disagree, debate, or expand our views based on a variety of perspectives from others.

Social media is also isolating, as we scroll alone. You're consuming content created by other people, but the experience of reading, reacting, or perusing is a solitary one. You may feel like you're connecting as you comment online, but in reality, the relationships are largely superficial.

We've talked about the decline of social skills and the deterioration of people's confidence with interactions. Social media has a role here too as it can also exacerbate insecurities by creating constant comparisons. As the popular saying goes, "Comparison is the thief of joy." Viewing photo-shopped or curated content, people may not feel they measure up, and this can wreak havoc with self-esteem and self-confidence.

Research found ⁹ that 60% of people compare themselves to others online. The effects are damaging, with 53% of respondents who then felt jealous and 36% who felt high levels of worry. One study ¹⁰ assessed 18,000 people at three points during an eight-year period and found that as envy increased, well-being and mental health declined. Some people believe envy can raise motivation and lead to economic success. But the study showed that neither of these were true. Envy didn't translate into motivation or greater economic achievement.

It's a vicious circle. Social media platforms create the impetus for seeking likes, shares, and follows, and they are addictive. When we receive social validation, we get a dopamine hit in the reward centers of our brains, causing us to look for more of that experience. The never-enough, competitive pursuit of online validation raises social anxiety, and in turn, more social anxiety reinforces the need for likes, shares, and follows.

The comparison effect is also relevant to loneliness because people see photos of others who are sharing time together, attending conferences, and taking selfies of their group. In the process, they may be excluding others. Research ¹¹

discovered that many people experience FOMO (a fear of missing out) as well as social anxiety when they spend more time on social media. Across all ages, FOMO and social anxiety are linked with low self-compassion as well as low self-esteem.

Social media has also been linked with greater relationship problems. In one study, ¹²when people spent more time on Instagram, they experienced less satisfaction with their relationships. This in turn led to more conflicts and negative issues in their relationships. And these triggered more addictive use of Instagram. Again, it was a vicious cycle.

Perhaps most obviously, social media replaces time spent face-to-face in real relationships. Likes, shares, reactions, or reposts may feel good in the moment, but they can be damaging if they're replacing time spent with people in real life celebrating, socializing, or commiserating.

Being real together and present together is critical to our well-being and mental health, but social media can separate us even when we gather. You can't go to a restaurant without seeing a group of people sitting at a table together and focused separately on their devices. They may be consuming content or texting people who aren't there. They are communicating at a distance while they fail to interact with the people across the table from them.

The Bad News About Bad News

The other way that social media is exacerbating our loneliness and disconnection is based on its generally negative content. In particular, there is more bad news than ever today. One study ¹³looked at 47 news sources and 23 million headlines and discovered that, compared with the year 2000, there are more negative headlines today, and there is a greater proportion of headlines that reflect sadness, fear, anger, and even disgust.

In addition, the nature of the news drives behavior. You're more likely to click on negative news, compared with news that is either positive or neutral. And negative content spreads much more quickly across greater numbers of people because we tend to share the negative more quickly. Essentially, the negative has a greater chance of going viral. ¹⁴

Bad news can also be triggering. ¹⁵With bad news, people are brought low emotionally, and this negatively impacts well-being. And there is a relationship between anger and attention. ¹⁶When you're angry, you'll have a harder time focusing, which reduces the concentration that is necessary to more deeply understand an issue, manage emotions, or empathize with others. Negative information also tends to stick with you longer as well. It is more memorable and has a longer-term effect as compared with news that is more neutral or positive. ¹⁷

When we process information on social media, we are affected by our cognitive biases. These are the shortcuts our brains take for efficiency. One of our mental shortcuts is called *attentional bias*. In this cognitive process, you see something bad or threatening and it activates your threat response. You have a heightened sense of vigilance in case you need to react or protect yourself from danger. Even though there is no actual saber-tooth tiger chasing you, your response is one of stress activation, and this makes negative information both triggering and memorable.

Another cognitive bias relevant to our interactions with social media is called the *exposure effect*. If you see something on a repeated basis, you perceive that it is more prevalent and that you are therefore more at risk from it. And the cognitive bias of the *recency effect* also relates. When you see something more recently, you tend to remember it, because it's especially accessible in your short-term memory. This isn't a problem if you're watching cute puppy videos, but it can be damaging to well-being when you're consuming content that is negative or threatening.

Ultimately your thinking patterns are activated by the information you consume online, and they can get in the way of calm, steady, logical processing.

Of course, social media isn't totally bad, despite its downsides. It allows us to obtain information, connect with people at a distance, or do research online. But it's also important to know that it's a factor in our sense of separation and the deterioration of our mental health.

Discontinuity and Overwhelm

Closely related to social media is the anxiety people are feeling generally. There is widespread fear, polarization, distrust, and disagreement today.

The term *VUCA* refers to our world that is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. And some people have added *MAX* to the acronym as well, which stands for massive, accelerating, and exponential to describe the change we're facing. We're going through a lot, and our societies and systems are changing faster than our brains can evolve. Neurologically, we prefer predictability, and we shy away from ambiguity and uncertainty.

A study of 11,000 leaders ¹⁸found that 43% of CEOs were concerned by the uncertainty they were facing individually, as leaders, and for their businesses. In addition, 78% of 30,000 respondents across 31 territories and countries reported ¹⁹that they felt the changes in the world were happening too fast for them to cope and were causing anxiety.

It's a situation of poly-crisis in which we perceive too much crisis in too many places with too many implications to process effectively. The challenges can also be described as *discontinuity* in which we perceive a breaking point and in which it seems like nothing is as it has been before.

I was leading a session recently on the talent shortage and its impact on the employee experience. A senior HR leader was describing the strategies they were using to engage people, foster well-being, and encourage connectedness. He said, "Nothing we've done in the past is working today." The company was at a point of fundamental change and having to rethink and reinvent their approaches for today's context. This is a perfect example of discontinuity.

In addition to feelings of overwhelm and discontinuity, people are also experiencing fear and distrust. One survey ²⁰ that included 32,000 people in 28 countries found that between 88% and 61% of people were experiencing fear. This was based on all kinds of issues from inflation, economic concerns, and worries about job loss to anxiety about climate change, nuclear war, and information war. The survey also found that people's trust in leaders had declined, with fully 61% of people who believed leaders were actively trying to mislead them on key issues.

The reason this is important for loneliness, friendship, and mental health is because we're generally struggling. And the effects are exponential. They combine and they cascade, interfering with our ability to cope. For example, when we're fearful, we tend to feel more disconnected. This in turn can make it even harder to reach out to others.

We are also seeing a deterioration in the quality of our basic interactions with each other. A healthy society requires civility in which we're polite, courteous, and respectful of each other. But 59% of people believe that civility has declined. ²¹ In addition, we're more polarized than ever in our views on most subjects. And while disagreement doesn't have to mean we dislike each other, we are increasingly viewing others negatively on a personal basis if we disagree with their views.

On top of our reduced civility, people today resist sharing their honest opinions because they believe their views will be unpopular or generate negative attention. A study of 19,000 people ²² found that every demographic group self-silences, holds back, or misrepresents their opinions, points of view, or true feelings on topics they perceive to be sensitive. Those most likely to hold back are political independents and college grads.

We talked earlier about how people didn't believe others would want to chat on the subway or in a waiting room, and how people were wrong about that assumption. It's a similar situation here. People tend to self-silence because they think others will disagree with them. But there are surprising levels of agreement among us. In fact, on 43 of 64 controversial or sensitive issues, 90% of groups that were different demographically were in agreement in their views. The areas of agreement included issues from immigration and women's rights to school choice and voter identification. Men and women agreed on 57 of 64 issues, and Gen Z agreed with other generations on 57 of 64 issues.

Unfortunately, when people don't feel they can express their opinions or be themselves, it can cause declines in mental health and physical well-being. Retreating or avoiding the opportunity to share is known as *identity threat*, according to research, ²³ and it can aggravate feelings of disconnection, isolation, and loneliness.

At the same time people are holding back and don't feel free to express themselves fully, we are also experiencing high levels of overload. There is more news available today that we access through more channels than ever. We're exposed more frequently to more news. In fact, 86% of people reported ²⁴ that they get news and information from computers, tablets, or smartphones. This is a far cry from an evening sitting around a radio or a television with the family taking in a half an hour of the nightly news once a day.

News is also positioned as breaking or hot, creating a daily reaction of urgency, or the need for immediate attention. And the news is also superficial. We're seeing brief stories, posts, or memes without the benefit of deeper understanding. In addition, news is increasingly questionable, with sources that may or may not be reputable. In addition, viral sharing can cause confusion about what's really happening or actually a major issue. All of this can be disempowering as we struggle to understand, process, and make sense of all that we're hearing, seeing, and exposed to.

Overwhelm can get in the way of relationships and change how we interact as well. In fact, researchers ²⁵ believe sensory overload is at play. Too many inputs can overwhelm our nervous system and cause stress and a retreat from each other. The disconnection may be conscious or subconscious, but it can drive us to rush through social interactions or fail to be fully present in social situations. We're giving our attention to other things. In some cases, we remove the personal element from social transactions. For example, when we choose to pay for parking using the automated lane rather than the attended lane. It's more efficient, but we've chosen the option that eliminates social exchange.

In total, we are generally stressed out, worried, and anxious both nationally and globally. ²⁶ Just when we need each other most, we're facing incivility, disagreement, and deterioration of our relationships.

In Greek mythology, Chaos was an entity defined by a void or nothingness as well as a disordered mass of all things. Chaos gave birth to both night and darkness. This personification is a good match to our struggles today. We feel overwhelmed by too much all the time, and ironically, may feel emptiness as a result. We don't always know how to process everything, and we may retreat from others or fall back on digital interactions. These lack richness and leave us feeling unfulfilled, as if we're stumbling around in the darkness alone.

The Negative Narrative About Work

Another factor in loneliness today is our belief system about work. The narrative about work has become terribly negative with trends like quiet quitting, lazy girl jobs, or bed rotting. Doing as little as possible is touted as the ideal. Work is a grind, it is damaging, and it is debilitating, goes the story.

But in reality, work is a vital part of life. We all have an instinct to matter, and we want to contribute to our communities. Work is a fundamental way that we accomplish these ends.

Of course, not all work is inherently rewarding, and some work simply provides a paycheck and puts food on the table. But all work has dignity. Martin Luther King Jr. made this point during the sanitation workers' strike in Memphis in which he talked about the need to appreciate the work of trash collectors as much as physicians because "if [either the sanitation worker or the physician] doesn't do his job, disease is rampant." ²⁷ Each person who works makes a contribution, no matter what the nature of the work itself.

Work can deliver a sense of purpose, giving people a reason to get up in the morning and get out of the house. We may not be solving world peace or world hunger, but we're doing the small but significant things that others are counting on us for,

whether it's our co-worker, our customer, our team, or our organization.

Having a sense of purpose has a direct effect on loneliness. Researchers studied ²⁸ more than 2,300 adults in Switzerland, surveying them about their purpose, their loneliness, how much support they offered to others, and how much support they received from others. They found that when people had a greater sense of purpose, they were less lonely and they also both gave and received more support from others. Work can deliver this sense of purpose, as others depend on us and as we show up to fulfill responsibilities.

Work can also contribute to our connectedness with others. When we work, we know others are relying on us, and this sense of obligation contributes to happiness. We want to know we matter, and work provides the context for this experience, putting us into relationship and community with others. This harkens back to the study ²⁹ in which older adults who were working had half the incidence of loneliness compared with those who were not working.

But in addition to the harmful stories about work, patterns of presence in the office have changed since the pandemic as well. The fact that we're less connected at work is partly a matter of where work is happening. Hybrid and remote work have been features of work for decades, and these were accelerated during the pandemic. And while increasing numbers of businesses are asking people to be in the office more, hybrid and remote work are certainly here to stay. People will continue to work in these ways for many years to come.

In the midst of hybrid and remote work, 20% of those who work remote report they are lonely “a lot” during the day, according to Gallup. ³⁰ And another survey ³¹ found that 69% of those who work remote say they rarely or never work outside their home, and 20% say don't leave the house more than once per week. In addition, 27% report they don't talk to other people more than once a week.

In addition, those who work hybrid said they felt less connected to the purpose of the organization, its culture, the meaning of their work, or the expectations for their performance. ³²

Working at a distance can be terrific if we want to avoid the commute or if we need to interrupt our afternoon to zip over to our child's la cross game, but it can also create loneliness among and between colleagues.

Fern is a great example of how work matters. She was a well-loved member of the IT team for a global finance organization. She'd been part of the company for about 15 years and was connected and respected. She enjoyed her job, and she was appreciated by the people she worked with. At the same time she was smart and hard-hitting, she was also perpetually positive and focused on how to solve problems and get things done. Overall, she was the kind of person that others wanted on the team for what she brought professionally, but also how she made people feel.

Following the pandemic, her co-workers were slow to return to the office, and Fern confided that she became lonely. She just didn't feel as connected to her colleagues. Even though she was coming into the office every day, others weren't. She was interacting online and seeing people in virtual meetings, but she was eating her lunch alone and spending time in the largely uninhabited office space.

Ultimately, she took an early retirement. Despite having loved her job and her team, she just wasn't enjoying it anymore. Work wasn't meeting her needs. She didn't have the social experience that reminded her how her work mattered, or how she mattered. Perhaps most interesting is that Fern lived alone. She had cats and friends and activities, but she didn't have a large household full of extended family. And yet still, she chose to retire, expecting to invest her time in her personal life to find the friends and activities that would fulfill her more than the empty experience work had become. Fern said after she retired, “I'm less lonely now, and it feels good to have control of my well-being.”

It makes intuitive sense that people who don't go into the office would feel lonely, but like Fern, 19% of those who work fully onsite also say they are lonely. ³³ It's likely an issue of mismatch in schedules. Those who work remotely don't see their coworkers in the office. But in addition, those who go to the office are missing out on seeing their colleagues who are working from home.

Related research ³⁴ shows that people who synchronize their schedules are happiest. In this case, they studied the dispensing of antidepressant medication (SSRIs). It was no surprise that people took less SSRIs when they were on vacation, but it was especially intriguing that they took less when *more* people were on vacation.

It wasn't just time off that reduced their need for antidepressants; it was time off with their people. The researchers also posit that when more people are off at the same times, they not only gain energy and goodwill based on interactions with people they know but also based on more interactions with others in the community. Specifically, they run into people in cafes or chat with others who are also involved in vacation activities.

The dynamic was dubbed *concentrated vacationing* and *collective restoration* by the researchers, but it has application to work as well. We want to be in community with others. This includes not only relaxing together at the beach but also being in the office. Capturing the problem on the whiteboard together or chatting with a work friend at the snack bar are satisfying. An empty office can be de-energizing, but when schedules are synchronized and people show up together, it contributes to well-being.

The negative story about work has reinforced behaviors in which people stay separate or distant from colleagues and has therefore undermined the powerful role work can have in building belonging and esteem, and in beating loneliness.

Onscreen and Exhausted

Being onscreen has also contributed to our sense of loneliness and disconnection. It's a double-edged sword, because on the one hand, we've been able to connect with more people in more places more easily, based on audio and video conferencing. But being on screen has also been exhausting and challenging because it doesn't allow for us to read each other, relate, or respond as we do face-to-face.

When we're in person, we tend to mirror each other's body language, and this builds relationships. When someone else leans forward, you do too; or when they rest their chin on their hand, you find yourself doing the same. This is often unconscious. We mimic facial expressions, based on our instincts, and this helps us identify and experience others' feelings as well. ³⁵

Classic research on nonverbal communication suggests that we gain 93% of our information from nonverbal sources as compared to the words people use. We pay attention to eye contact, body posture, cadence of speech, and more. But when we're on screen, it's harder to pick up on some of these more subtle cues. It can also be exhausting, because each person in their separate screen demands some mirroring, and it can be impossible to echo as effectively with multiple small windows on each other.

In addition, all our time onscreen may be causing us to feel less rewarded by our virtual connections. And it may also be causing us to miss or mis-identify nonverbal cues, failing to connect as deeply or as effectively as we might. And screen time isn't only a problem for those who are working. Even when they're very young, some children have high exposure to screens and less time interacting in real life.

In my area, we have extensive walking paths, and I was out for a run on a lovely summer day. As I was running, I saw a young family coming toward me on the path. The dad was pushing a stroller with a toddler, and the mom was holding the leash for the family dog. It seemed positive from a distance, but as they came closer, I could see that the child was holding a device in his hands and watching a video.

I was disheartened. Instead of listening to the chatter of his mom and dad during the walk and learning the rhythm of conversation; instead of being entertained by the dog; instead of experiencing the breeze, the sunshine, or the birdsong; the little boy was absorbed with his device. There may have been plenty of good reasons that his parents were choosing to keep him entertained with his device. But still, as I ran on, I worried about the impact on him individually. I also thought about the likelihood that others his age were having similar experiences, and I ruminated about the impact on our broader society over time, including how we learn to relate and connect.

Time Poverty

Another challenge today is that people say they don't have enough time to invest in relationships. It's ironic that as we spend more time onscreen, online, and scrolling, we also say we don't have enough time. A friend used to say, "The more time saving devices we have, the less time we have." And it's true.

Time poverty is on the rise and people say they feel time-poor with too many demands and not enough capacity to deal with them. According to research, ³⁶when people feel a sense of this *time scarcity*, they are more likely to report lower levels of productivity and well-being, and they're more likely to report reduced physical health.

Time poverty can be exacerbated by perfectionism and procrastination, but another issue that aggravates feelings of time scarcity is the prevalence of hustle culture. In *hustle culture*, also known as the *cult of busyness*, we emphasize moving fast, rushing around, and dealing with all the things. We use hustle and the stress it creates as a proxy for progress.

Unfortunately, we have come to associate being busy with being in high demand. Time is a scarce resource, so we perceive that the person who needs to do everything and be everywhere is especially valuable. We're associating busyness with esteem and importance. In fact, research ³⁷found that people tend to associate a lack of leisure time and a high level of busyness with traits like competence or ambition.

Hustle and the experience of multitasking has become pervasive. And interruptions in the form of notifications or personally checking messages are significant parts of hustle behavior. Research ³⁸found links between interruptions and annoyance, anxiety, stress, and frustration. And these in turn drove more errors, increased time to complete tasks, and a greater likelihood of forgetting the initial task people set out to accomplish.

Another study ³⁹included an experiment that proved the point. People were asked to turn off their notifications for one day. Then, they were asked on a survey how much they interrupted themselves to check notifications or messages, how much they were able to accomplish compared to what they set out to do that day, how irritated or annoyed they felt, how much they struggled with FOMO, and how much pressure they felt to immediately respond to others. When people turned off notifications, they saw increases in productivity and reductions in irritation. Those who had lower FOMO and lower pressure to respond also experienced increases in performance.

Even as notifications and distractions can detract from productivity and effectiveness, being busy or under stress can be a symbol of status. But bragging about how busy you are is apparently a bridge too far in terms of social relationships. In another study, ⁴⁰when people saw others who were stressed and who were talking about it, they had negative reactions and were unlikely to offer help. When others were simply perceived as stressed, people didn't have the same negative reactions. In addition, when others shared how stressed they were with a close confidant, the close friend didn't have negative reactions. It was only when someone was perceived as being self-promoting or when they were perceived as aggrandizing their stress that people were turned off.

Ultimately, stress is reality, and we may sometimes feel the need to rush around to get things done. But these can get in the way of forming solid relationships, and using stress as a symbol of status will also create barriers to connecting with others.

We may think the solution to too much hustling is to simply stop or slow down. But it seems we also tend to resist moments that are empty or lacking stimulation. One study ⁴¹put people into a situation where they had nothing to do. Incredibly, 25% of women and 67% of men chose to administer an electric shock to themselves rather than sit quietly. And they didn't wait long to introduce distraction. They chose to shock themselves within only 6–15 minutes of sitting quietly. People literally chose an electric shock over a short period of quiet time.

Even so, if we can avoid distractions, it can be tremendously helpful. When people were able to spend time that they perceived to be boring or less stimulating, they were more likely to have greater *associative thought* in which they generated new ideas and made fresh connections between ideas. ⁴² And this kind of thinking is a factor in innovation. When we're rushing and struggling with time poverty, we may be undercutting our mental health. We may also be getting in our own way, retreating from relationships and failing to invest in creating connections with others.

Lonely or Alone?

It's also worth considering whether you're truly lonely or if you just happen to be alone. In our social, extroverted, always-on society, we tend to judge being alone as a negative state. But it's also possible to be alone without being lonely.

How much time you spend by yourself seems to matter. A study ⁴³ used a tracking system to determine whether people were alone and then compared this to survey responses assessing whether they felt isolated. The study found that when people spent more than 75% of their time alone, they were more likely to have a negative sense of isolation and loneliness. This was especially true among people who were older.

Another element of whether you feel lonely, versus whether you're simply alone, has to do with control. If you've made the choice to be alone, you're more likely to feel fine about it. This was demonstrated in a study ⁴⁴ in which researchers studied whether people were alone on a self-determined or non-self-determined basis.

In other words, they looked at whether people wanted to be alone or not, and whether they had been invited out and chosen not to attend, or whether they'd been left out of the invitation. When people had made the choice to be alone, they were more likely to have a sense of well-being. But when people were excluded, they were more likely to feel socially anxious, depressed, or lonely.

Another aspect of feeling lonely is how supported you feel by your network. You don't necessarily need armies of friends or family to surround you, but you need to know you can call on someone to help when you're in need. If you feel there's no one to call, you may be more likely to feel lonely, but if you feel strong support for at least one or two other people, you'll be less likely to feel isolated, or to interpret your time alone as a negative experience.

People may indeed be lonely, but it's also worth understanding the impact of social pressure to be always connected and empower ourselves to choose solitude when we want it and to avoid judging ourselves negatively when we do. It's not necessary to be an extrovert to be happy, and it's not the number of your connections that matters most. Instead, it's your level of control and personal satisfaction that make the biggest difference.

Key Points for Reflection

Here are important ideas to keep in mind from this chapter.

- We've elevated convenience over connection, and this has driven disconnectedness in our day-to-day interactions.
- Social media has had negative effects on our relationships and our interactions. It has exacerbated a sense of disconnection.
- We are exposed to increasing amounts of negative news, and we are overwhelmed. We are also spending a lot of time on screens. These have the effects of eroding connection and mental health.
- A pervasive narrative about work frames it as a negative experience when in fact work can be a context where we find meaning and make friends.
- We struggle with time poverty and time scarcity in a culture that celebrates hustle and being busy.
- Being alone isn't the same as being lonely, and there is value in reflecting on the differences and making intentional choices for solitude.

In the face of the challenges, we'll turn to some encouraging data about the power of connection and the positive impacts that arise when we are connected and embedded in community.

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Chapter 3

The Positive Impacts of Connection

“Shared joy is double joy; shared sorrow is half sorrow.”

~Folk Saying

The Significance of Relationships

Connections have compelling benefits, and while we certainly face challenges, there is promise in the positive outcomes that emerge from belonging. The data provides insight into how we can invest and create and maintain relationships.

We've talked about research linking friendship with all kinds of health outcomes. Additional research ¹ discovered that the amount of time we spend interacting with others has positive effects. Specifically, when people logged more hours socializing, talking, or connecting, they tended to demonstrate better mental function and cognitive performance. The researchers hypothesize that when people interact socially, the process demands asking questions, listening, empathizing, thinking, and then responding, and all of these are related to cognitive function.

Our effectiveness in interacting makes a difference. When we're better at relating with others, we experience less loneliness. ² In addition, how we form relationships with others is apparently linked to three elements of relationships. ³ Specifically, when people perceived they had greater social support, when they felt more socially integrated into groups, and when they had less negative social interactions, they had better health outcomes. This was true when they had stronger relationships as well as when their interactions were more superficial.

It seems being in conversation with others affects how we think and how our brains respond. When we are talking with others, our brain waves get in synch together. They literally mirror each other. ⁴ This is also related to the extent to which we consider others when we process and make decisions. Greater concern for each other appears to be better.

A study ⁵ assessed whether people's decision-making was better when they were processing for themselves or on behalf of others. The research paired participants who didn't know each other prior to the experiment. Researchers connected electrodes to each person's right hand. Then, participants were asked to select symbols that resulted in the delivery of uncomfortable electrical stimulation to their hand. Participants in the study had to learn which symbols delivered more or less discomfort from the electrical stimulation.

When people were choosing symbols for others and affecting the electrical stimulation delivered to their partner, they learned faster and made better decisions than when their choices affected the electrical stimulation to just their own hands. The testing also included a self-assessment of empathy. Those who made better decisions to reduce their partners' pain unsurprisingly scored higher in terms of their empathy.

In addition to the electrical testing and the survey, the study also included MRI testing. Those who made better decisions on behalf of themselves and their partner also had more involvement from the ventromedial PFC part of their brain, an area associated with decision-making, social cognition, moral judgment, and regulation of emotions. They also had greater connectivity to the right temporoparietal junction which is the part of the brain responsible for attention, spatial perception, social cognition, and embodied processing.

Based on the research, we can conclude that making better decisions for others recruits the parts of our brains responsible for not only body sensation and awareness, but also for social and emotional experiences. Empathy is correlated with making judgements that are better for others, and this is evident both in how our brains operate and in terms of our behaviors.

Health and Happiness

We talked earlier about the extent to which people report they have reduced numbers of friends and the ways people are relying on friends less these days. But importantly, friendship is a significant driver of health and happiness.

One study ⁶ assessed people's responses to a survey about their family and friendships as well as their health and happiness. It examined more than 271,000 people across 100 countries and multiple age groups. Stronger relationships with family and friends were associated with greater health and happiness. And for people who were older, friends were even more correlated with health and happiness than family.

In another part of the same study, researchers looked at more than 7,400 people and their responses to a second survey. They found when friends were a source of strain, people experienced a decline in happiness and health. And when friends were a source of support, health and happiness were greater. Again, this may seem obvious, but it builds a case for how we invest in improving our experiences of friendship.

Another study examined people in three groups: those who were very happy, those who reported average levels of happiness, and those who were very unhappy. For those who were happiest, multiple variables drove the experience. In particular, they had higher levels of sociability, extroversion, and agreeableness. The very happy group also had better romantic and social relationships. ⁷ So, friendship had to do with their own characteristics as well as the nature of their relationship with others.

Does our number of friends matter? Perhaps not. Another study ⁸ found that it's more about solid relationships than popularity or simply the number of friends we have. In this case, reliable friendships were associated with positive outcomes for adolescents, and the effects carried into their adult lives.

When people had a greater number of closer relationships, they reported higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of depression or social anxiety both in adolescence and in adulthood. This was contrasted with adolescents who focused more on being popular, which was associated with more depression and social anxiety as well as deterioration of self-esteem. Pursuing deeper relationships has better outcomes than simply seeking popularity.

Friendship is also linked with greater resilience and greater ability to cope with challenges. In another study of adolescents, ⁹ when participants had higher quality friendships, they were able to cope more constructively, actively managing stress. Specifically, they were able to engage, rather than disengage with friends and they took initiative to seek social support. Higher quality friendships helped both boys and girls in the study, but they were especially impactful for boys.

The Impact of Presence

Being in proximity and being present together are also critical elements for creating connections, and they have been studied rather extensively.

First, being face-to-face activates our vagus nerve which is the main component of our parasympathetic nervous system. When the vagus nerve is activated, it calms the body, lowers heart rate, supports digestion, and even controls mood. The vagus system is known as our “rest and digest” response or our “tend and befriend” response.

Research ¹⁰ found that when people interacted with others in person, their depression was reduced and the parasympathetic control of their heart was increased, resulting in lower heart rate and greater heart rate variability, both of which are attributes of positive cardiac effects. Presence positively impacted health.

The power of presence is also evident in social settings. One especially fun study analyzed the effects of presence on sports teams. The home field advantage is well known. When teams play at home with the support of their own fans and the roar of the local crowd, they are more likely to win. In fact, they get a 17% advantage. Research during the pandemic also proved this point. When teams played at home without people in the stands, their home-field advantage dropped by 50%. Being on your own turf matters, but it's the community and the supporters that make the biggest difference.

There is another telling point about the importance of being together. It turns out that people need to gather in order to make friends and feel connected with their community. While this doesn't seem so groundbreaking, it actually is, because it demonstrates the physical elements of an environment that contribute to connection and therefore, less loneliness.

Specifically, in the study, ¹¹ when people didn't have places to gather, like community centers, parks, restaurants, or coffee shops, they were more likely to report they had no close friends. Fully 43% of respondents reported that they had only one or two close friends or no close friends when they were in a situation with less gathering spaces. This was compared with only 25% who said the same when they did have access to gathering spaces.

But when people *did* have places to gather, 34% said they had many friends. This was compared to only 12% who said the same if they lacked places to gather. Being together physically has significant impacts connections and friendships.

Years ago, when I was consulting with companies to improve their cultures, we did a comprehensive assessment of social networks and the connections people had across the organization. In general, networks were clustered in predictable patterns based on where people sat as who people worked with regularly. But there was one group of connections that was perplexing. Certain people were connected in surprising clusters across jobs, departments, responsibilities, and floors of the building.

After studying the pattern and after doing follow-up interviews, we figured out that they were all connected because they were smokers. Smoking wasn't allowed in the building, so this was the group of people who would stand outside at their break times to smoke. They got together at the same times on the same days in the same location and built strong relationships that overshadowed any of the usual linkages. It was a great example of how gathering together drove their connections.

Connections Drive Performance

Connections also have a positive effect on effectiveness. A study on cohesion examined adults working together in teams. Cohesion was defined as the team members' feelings of being connected, committed, and aligned with each other. With greater cohesion, teams performed better. In addition, their desire for group acceptance motivated them more than monetary rewards. ¹²

In addition to cohesion, friendship at work also makes a positive difference. Surveys ¹³ found that when people had more friendships at work, they reported 36% higher satisfaction with life, 34% more likelihood of reaching their goals, and 27% greater job satisfaction. And with a greater sense of overall belonging, they reported 24% more resilience and a 36% improvement in well-being.

The survey ¹⁴ also found that when people felt more connected, they experienced 91% more personal growth and 101% more professional growth. Learning and growth are linked with greater happiness. But why would more growth occur with greater connectedness? Because friends can provide input, coaching, and feedback. They can share information about opportunities they hear about, and they can offer support in reaching toward a new project or promotion.

In addition to the benefits to people, organizations also experience advantages when people have more connections at work. Glassdoor, a site that allows employees to rate their employers, found that organizations have a 32% higher overall rating when employees report more connectedness with colleagues. In addition, companies with more connected employees are 14 times more likely to be rated as top places to work. Employees are also 25% more likely to say they would recommend the company to a friend.

With all the data about the power of friendship and its impact at work, there is still debate about what's appropriate. One of the articles I wrote on the topic of friendship at work motivated tons of discussion online. Some people agreed that work was where they made their friends, and they said that friends at work were special and significant.

On the other hand, there were people who said that friends at work were inappropriate. They wanted a greater distinction between work and life, and they felt that work friends would intrude on their personal boundaries. After much debate, one person commented that for them it was less about whether friends at work were appropriate or not; they just wanted a workplace that was *friend ly*. This seemed like a great way to wrap the discussion.

Ultimately, it's a matter of personal preference, for sure. You may prefer close friends in the workplace. Or you may prefer more distance. But even if you're not BFFs with people at work, feeling some level of connection, alignment, and care for people has positive results.

Being together drives results. Researchers ¹⁵ studied a work club in which people from multiple startups worked and socialized with each other. They found that being within about 65 feet of each other delivered positive outcomes in the form of a *knowledge spillover*. At that distance, they were more likely to exchange information and adopt new ideas from those around them. In addition, those who sat within 65 feet of others were also more likely to receive more than \$1 million in seed money and funding.

Another study ¹⁶ found that when people sat within 25 feet of top performers, their own performance increased by 15%. This was especially evident among people who had weaker skills. If someone already had strong skills in a certain area, they were less likely to pick up on the *performance spillover*. But when people were less experienced or competent in a given area, the performance effect was greatest.

In a sports team example, research ¹⁷ found that when high-scoring NBA players were on the court, other players scored more as well. The superstars performed well, but they also had a positive effect on the play of their teammates.

Additional research ¹⁸ demonstrated that when teams worked together in dedicated rooms, their productivity doubled. Specifically, the researchers looked at software development teams within a global automotive manufacturer. They compared the teams who sat together in dedicated rooms to the team members who sat in more traditional offices.

When teams sat in dedicated rooms, their productivity was twice as high after the first check-in, and it doubled again when the researchers went back to follow up. In fact, there was a four-fold increase in productivity when people sat in proximity to each other. This was because they could tune in when a conversation was pertinent to them or choose to tune out when they needed to do focused work. In addition, they could jump into a conversation or contribute to problem-solving when they had value to add. With proximity, information flowed more easily, and issues could quickly be resolved.

Research ¹⁹ also found evidence of knowledge spillover based on proximity. In the study, when researchers were physically closer together on a college campus (for example, their offices were in the same building), the papers they published received a greater number of citations, which is a measure of credibility and the impact of their work.

Another study examined 40,000 scientific papers and 2,300 patents produced by researchers at MIT over a ten-year period. The study ²⁰ found that when people were located closer together, they collaborated more. In addition, when there were a greater number of different departments in a building, there were more patents produced. Overall, proximity drove both collaboration and invention.

Research on proximity also finds that physical closeness predicts innovation. ²¹ The study looked at U.S. patents and found that the most innovative patents came from those who were in cities that had higher density. Essentially, proximity drove greater amounts of both informal and formal interaction including more idea sharing and collaborative thinking. This resulted in the development of more patents that were also more creative and novel.

So physical proximity drives positive experiences and results, but perceptions of proximity also matter. In a study on distance work, ²² people were put into situations where they were asked to collaborate virtually with others in three conditions. Specifically, they collaborated with those who were across a corporate campus, across the country, or across the globe. Researchers then looked at levels of follow-up, follow-through, and task completion. They found that people's responsiveness was correlated with distance.

The best levels of follow-through were evident when people were collaborating with others who were closer to them in terms of physical distance. The twist in the study was that the physical distances were only a matter of perception. Despite what they were told, people were sitting in separate rooms in the same area of a building.

The take-away message in the study is that proximity can be perceived as well as real. When we're closer to each other in real life, we behave differently. But our behavior is also affected by perceptions and beliefs about our distance as well.

In addition to physical proximity and personal exchanges, social networks are also germane. *Social networks* describe the dynamics of interaction across groups of people, including how connected people are, how they exchange information, and how they build relationships among the group members.

Research ²³ found that more connections result in better outcomes. Specifically, researchers examined people who won the Nobel Prize. They found that those who won were significantly more connected with others. In addition to higher degrees of their own connectivity, Nobel Prize winners were also part of networks that with greater interconnectedness, meaning that members of the network knew not only the Nobel Laureate, but they knew each other as well.

In addition, those who won the Nobel Prize were more likely to have broader and more diverse networks. This is referred to as *bridging*, when connections occur not within a certain group, but across groups. The power of the network effect is based on the ways that networks allow for the fast exchange of ideas, technology, and resources. This results in powerful outcomes.

A Caveat About Density

Cohesion, connectedness, and friendship have big impacts, and it's possible to conclude that the more we're together, the better the outcomes. But it must also be said that balance is necessary. Sometimes too much can be too much. The concept of density also matters.

As we've said, it's not all about extroversion or about having so many friends all the time. We also need personal space, privacy, and time away. Research on density is telling, because density affects our behaviors and willingness to help. Classic experiments explored the behavior of mice. While it may seem strange to study mice and relate the results to humans, the genomes of humans and mice are 85% identical. ²⁴

In research ²⁵ that was repeated and validated from 1948 through 1972, mice were placed in situations with no predators and with protection from disease and weather. The mice also had enough food and water. They reproduced to a point that population levels were extremely high, and then their social orders tended to break down.

With too many mice in too small a space, the mice became violent and aggressive. They didn't mate as much, mother mice were less likely to carry offspring to term, and mother mice failed to care for baby mice. Some mice demonstrated frenetic activity or cannibalism while others withdrew completely. In addition, many mice would only eat or drink when other mice were asleep.

Researchers called the dynamics *behavioral sink* to describe the ways that social behaviors and norms disintegrated and the extent to which the mouse societies broke down with overcrowding. They hypothesized that humans too would experience the breakdown of social interactions in situations with high levels of density and too many people within too little space.

Studies of humans did indeed demonstrate changes in social helping behavior when populations were most dense. It wasn't just the size of a population, but its density that mattered most. It was mainly about the number of people per square mile in a city.

Experiments with people ²⁶ set up situations in which someone dropped a pen on a city street. Researchers would then observe whether people would pick up the pen and return it to the owner. They also identified whether people would be willing to break a dollar bill, providing change when a stranger requested it. In situations with the greatest population density, people were least likely to return a pen and least likely to attempt to make change.

We talked earlier about the experience of overwhelm that can cause distress and retreat from social relationships, but this retreat can be based on density as well.

So, the goal isn't too many relationships or too much closeness. Instead, there are levels of optimal density in which we draw energy from others and experience positive emotions from being together. Connections, community, and cohesion have power. These must be balanced with having enough space for ourselves.

Key Points for Reflection

Here are important ideas to keep in mind from this chapter.

- Evidence demonstrates that relationships have a positive impact on a wide variety of outcomes from health and happiness to longevity and mental well-being.
- A sense of belonging at work is important as well, with a connected work environment making a difference for people as well as for businesses.
- Proximity is the primary determinant of relationships, and the people with whom we have more proximity tend to be those with whom we build the tightest relationships.
- Being present together has a significant bearing on relationships and behaviors.
- Optimal density reinforces pro-social behaviors.

Next, we'll turn to the social dynamics that drive connections and look at why relationships and community work the way they do.

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Chapter 4

The Social Dynamics of Connection and Community

“All for one, and one for all.”

~Alexandre Dumas, The Three Musketeers

What We Need from Community

We know that loneliness and disconnection are at record-high levels and that they have deleterious effects. And we know the alternatives of having friends, building solid relationships, and being in proximity to each other are powerfully positive. But why does it work this way, and what are some of the dynamics of communities and relationships?

To answer this, we can consider what we need from communities and what it takes for a community to thrive. The factors will vary somewhat, as different kinds of communities will have them to greater or lesser extents, but research demonstrates six core aspects of groups that are most fundamental to success and sustainability.

First, a community needs a sense of purpose. Purpose doesn't have to be highfalutin, but it must be understood by members. More comprehensively, a purpose may be a mission or a calling. A company has a mission to improve its customers' lives with a certain product or service. A non-profit aspires to serve certain needs in the community.

But a purpose can also be relatively ordinary. An example is a book group that wants to enjoy reading and build camaraderie through getting together regularly. A community needs a sense of purpose, but people also need to feel a personal connection to it. They want to feel like they fit and like they matter to the group. Ultimately, the purpose is the reason people will show up, engage, and commit their time and effort to the group.

Second, communities must also have shared values and norms for the behavior of members. These are often tacit rather than explicit, but they are always part of a certain community or group. A group will enforce its behavioral expectations in a variety of ways, and when group members don't comply, they may be excluded.

The range is broad in terms of how groups police their norms. An eye roll communicates an inappropriate comment in a meeting, while job termination is a more conclusive demonstration that a person isn't a good fit with the values, priorities, or performance standards of an organization.

A large consumer goods company is a great example of how groups manage other members with regard to their values. A team was working on the launch of a new product. They had gathered for a few days to work through all the necessary processes including product features, marketing, and sales plans.

As with so many corporate workshops, there was an activity in which people were placed into small teams and made to compete based on their ideas for strategies to bring the product to market. The prize was nominal. It was nothing more than a ticket for a free snack in the cafeteria. A rather new employee, Minh, was participating enthusiastically with his team. He wanted to win at all costs, and he suggested the group cheat in order to clinch the win.

However, cheating was decidedly not an acceptable approach in the corporate culture. People frowned and leaned away from the table when he first suggested it. When he failed to notice their cues and continued advocating for a little subterfuge, a couple of the team members said that it just wouldn't be acceptable. Losing a light-weight workshop activity was no big deal. But the commitment to the values of honesty and integrity was a very big deal indeed.

The workshop incident wasn't significant, and people forgot about it quickly. Minh was relatively successful at the company for about a year and a half, but ultimately, he left. In his exit interview, he told HR that he just hadn't felt like he fit with his colleagues.

Yes, exactly.

Some people have described the norms of a community as an immune system. When someone joins and they don't fit or they threaten the values of the group, people will surround and block the “invader,” so they don't degrade the integrity of the group.

This can be healthy as in the case of Minh's story. But communities must also be sure they're able to bring in new ideas and positively provoke growth so they can adapt and survive. For example, a new CEO seeks to turn around a failing company by implementing a culture of high performance, necessitating some changes in policies. Or a knitting group welcomes a new member who is a bit loud and raucous, but who brings fresh energy to the group. These are good examples of how new thinking or new approaches can be healthy.

The third set of factors for a sustainable community includes learning, growth, and adaptability. Context and environment change constantly. From politics and economics to technology and social issues, there are always new ways a community must respond to its members, customers, competitors, and stakeholders. Especially today, in a world that is more volatile and unpredictable, communities must learn constantly. They must cultivate openness to other people, groups, opinions, and experiences. Openness to these helps a community anticipate change and adapt as it shifts happen.

To this end, a community must effectively monitor the environment and learn and grow over time. This may happen organically as an organization's members learn from each other on the job. Or it may happen more formally as a group seeks new skills together. Ultimately though, the ability to read the signals, make sense of them, and respond effectively are critical to a community's success.

A fourth factor for a healthy community is a robust flow of information. When more people have more information, the transparency tends to drive trust and esteem. But communication and information flow also ensure people can respond and react in the most appropriate ways, which also helps the community to stay agile.

The fifth element a community needs to sustain itself is for people to feel a sense of belonging and fairness. Belonging is when people feel they can bring their whole selves to the group, from their whacky sense of humor to their half-baked new ideas. When a group can celebrate and embrace the strengths and uniquenesses someone brings as well as help develop their weaknesses, both the individuals and the group will sustain health and well-being.

When people have psychological safety, they feel safe to be themselves, express their opinions, ask questions, or bring up issues without the threat of being embarrassed or punished. But psychological safety doesn't have to mean comfort. Ironically, when people have greater levels of psychological safety, they can be more comfortable being uncomfortable, taking risks and putting themselves out there. And this healthy risk-taking contributes to innovation and adaptation.

For communities to thrive, a sense of fairness and justice are also critical. People need a sense of distributive justice in which rewards and benefits are distributed fairly. But communities also need contributive justice in which members have a chance to contribute and expend effort and to be part of the community's success.

Sixth, communities need clear leadership. The leadership may be formal, as in the example of the manager of a work team, or it may be shared, as in the example of a professional women's group that rotates the discussion leader each month. Leadership in a sustainable community can also be emergent in the case of leaders who step forward when they're needed. If the group requires new ideas, a leader who is adept at driving innovation steps up. Or if there's a huge customer issue, a leader who is terrific with problem-solving comes to the fore.

There are lots of variables that make the difference between communities that are sustained over time, but these six fundamentals are a basis of success, failure, and the longevity of the group.

Behavioral Rules for Communities

In addition to considering factors that communities need for success and to sustain health for members and the group, we can also explore the behaviors that are most valued, prioritized, and encouraged among communities.

A sweeping study of societies ¹ is impressive for its insights but also for its scale, assessing 60 different communities across the globe. The researchers ² analyzed first-hand accounts from 600 sources over 300 years and found there were seven rules that guided people's behaviors within communities. The researchers referred to these as *moral rules*, because they describe the ethics that drove interactions.

The seven moral rules they found include: helping your family, helping your group, demonstrating reciprocity, demonstrating bravery, respecting a hierarchy and your superiors, dividing resources in an equitable way, and respecting ownership of property.

These are the expectations people have for each other, and they guide how group members form relationships and interact. When people demonstrate these kinds of behaviors, they gain respect and feel greater acceptance and belonging from the group.

In his role in the military, Lee has received not only official commendations and promotions but also respect and admiration from his soldiers. There are a variety of actions that have driven Lee's success, but helping the group and demonstrating bravery are certainly high on the list. In one of his weeks-long training experiences, Lee and his platoon were stationed on Oahu. Centipedes were everywhere. To get away from the centipedes at night, the men slept in their vehicles, but there wasn't enough room for all of them. Lee regularly slept on top of the Humvee so his men could sleep inside.

It was a stressful few weeks. Surviving hard times together is one of the primary reasons that groups bond, and the men have close relationships, even years later. But the example also points to the moral rules of groups, in which Lee demonstrated courage and supported the group with his actions and decisions. Elevating those group norms earned him high levels of respect and admiration.

These dynamics apply in our day-to-day interactions. We value those who demonstrate courage in standing up for others who may not be treated fairly, and we appreciate the team member who sacrifices his evening time to help us get through a thorny problem at work. We expect people to respect those with greater experience at work, and we value the input of those who are experts in their professions. We split the bill equitably when we meet our wine-tasting group each Monday. And we understand when someone cancels our lunch date to pick up a sick child from school.

The research on moral rules found that there was consistency in the moral rules across groups. But notably, there were also *no instances* in which the behaviors were negative. The behaviors that were most valued were always positive attributes of the group. For example, one of the moral values was helping family members, and there were no societies in which this was considered bad or negative.

If the researchers had found an example of a moral rule that was sometimes viewed negatively in a group, it would have pointed to *relativism* in which morality depended on interpretations of situations. Instead, the researchers found consistency. This suggests a more *universalist perspective* in which there is a human preference for certain moral behavior regardless of different regions, ethnicities, backgrounds, or situations.

The moral rules are useful in considering group norms. Specifically, if there is a conflict with a group member, it can be based on their failure to conform to the social rules. If a teammate takes credit for someone else's work, it's seen as negative because it betrays the rule to distribute resources (recognition and credit) fairly.

One notable factor in the study was the way that communities prioritize the moral rules differently. While all societies shared the top seven, some put certain rules ahead of others, and this made a significant difference in behaviors. For example, someone who speaks up assertively in a meeting and stands firmly for their opinion in the face of opposition is prioritizing the value of bravery above the value of group harmony. While communities value each of these, it's their relative priority that guides team member behavior.

The seven moral rules are valid to an understanding of connection and community, because when communities have a high level of alignment with them, and when members behave in concert with them, the community is more likely to be longer-lasting and resilient.

Dirt Roads and Superhighways

Social capital is when you have relationships that can guide you and provide both information and support so you can be your best and function in the group. When you have strong relationships and social capital within your group, including your family, neighborhood, friend group, or work group, it's known as *bonding social capital*. And when you have social capital outside your group, it's known as *bridging social capital*. You may recall we mentioned bridging social capital in our discussion of Nobel Laureates. The best situation is when you have both types, and you can gain support or resources from those you're close to, and also those who may be a greater distance from you in the network.

Those you don't know as well can also be referred to as *weak ties*. While *strong ties* are relationships with people you know better and have closer relationships with, weak ties are the people you know, but not as well. You might draw support from them, but not as often or as deeply.

An example comes from research on Agta and BaYaka hunter-gatherer groups. ³ Participants in the study wore sensing technology that allowed researchers to understand who they interacted with and the time they spent with others. Members who had strong friendships outside of their family groups had higher levels of shared knowledge and benefited from greater efficiencies based on the exchange of information between households.

Both kinds of ties and social capital are relevant, including both strong and weak ties, and both bonding and bridging social capital. When it's the late at night and you have a flat tire, you'll be more likely to call a strong-tie close friend to help. But weak ties can be especially helpful when you're finding the answer to a problem in an unfamiliar area, looking for resources that aren't already in your network, or looking for a job.

In fact, you're much more likely to find your next job based on a connection that a weak tie helps you make. This is because the people who are closer to you in your network are more likely to have access to information that is similar to your own. But a weak tie, because they are farther away in your network, is more likely to have intel, insight, or the inside scoop that isn't accessible to you without their guidance.

Collective Effervescence and Social Contagion

Another aspect of communities is the way they affect our behavior. This builds on the effects of presence that we talked about earlier but goes even deeper in terms of how people's choices can be infectious.

The *bandwagon effect* is a sociological concept in which people tend to behave along with the group. Everyone is doing it, so others are more likely to engage as well. At this point, you can hear your mother's voice asking you, "Just because your friends are doing it, do you think you should too?" Well, yes, sort of, based on the bandwagon effect.

Relatedly, *emotional contagion* is when you obtain moods from the group you're with. In classic sociology, the effect was dubbed *collective effervescence*, meaning that people would pick up on others' positive moods and joy and feel a sense of unity through experiences like rituals, ceremonies, or gatherings. Organizations leverage this effect when they organize conferences. You walk into the ballroom with thousands of other participants as the music plays loudly, and you feel the anticipation for the event. Or the company organizes its quarterly town hall in which everyone shows up in the auditorium. You feel the energy of being part of the crowd.

In addition to gaining vitality from groups, we also tend to behave in concert with those who are in our networks. People tend to share habits related to drinking, drug use, diet, and exercise habits. People even tend to align their moods and share similarities in how many children they have.

The evidence for these collective choices is demonstrated through multiple studies and across age groups. One research effort ⁴ found that people pick up thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors from others. This can be related to simple decisions like which product to purchase or more complex choices like whether to take a new job or move to a new house. Known as *social contagion*, behaviors spread through networks that are both online and that occur in real life.

Social networks also influence smoking. ⁵ Those who did or didn't smoke were generally associated with each other, and those who smoked tended to be more closely connected. In addition, when people stopped smoking, it affected their connections. If someone's spouse quit smoking, their likelihood of quitting increased by 67%. And if their friend stopped, their likelihood increased 36%. A sibling who quit increased their quitting by 25%.

Social networks also influence obesity and overweight. ⁶ In a study of more than 12,000 people over 32 years, researchers found that those who were overweight tended to have closer ties with each other. And if someone's friend became obese, they had a 57% increased chance of also becoming obese themselves.

The way that groups influence behavior is called *emergence*, when the norms of the group influence others. The person who is normally amiable becomes snarky with a group that is critical of others. Or a person who is typically very negative is influenced toward optimism by a group that interacts with a more hopeful outlook.

Another example is evident in how happiness spreads through networks. One study ⁷ followed almost 5,000 people for 20 years and regularly assessed their levels of happiness and positive emotion across 50,000 family and social ties. Researchers found that when one person in the network was happy, the effect on others was evident in people who were three linkages away. In other words, the original person was happy and this influenced their connection, that person's connection, and the next person's connection as well. There is a chain reaction in emotions across friends in the network.

Networks also provide us with a sense of support, and this is more pronounced when the people we rely on also know each other. In another study, ⁸ researchers asked people to identify their networks and then also assessed the respondents' perceptions of how much social support they received as well as their confidence and ability to cope with stressful situations.

When people had tighter networks in which the people they knew and relied on for support also knew each other, it contributed to greater perceptions of support as well as increased confidence in their capability to cope with difficulties. This is known as *transitive relationships* in which the people we know also know each other. It is similar to the power of friends who also know each other that we discussed earlier.

Related to these network effects, there is also compelling evidence that people think like their friends. A study using brain images found that people demonstrated similar neural activity as compared with their close relationships. According to the research, ⁹ people's brains were active in similar regions related to identity, sensory processing, motivation, and reward systems.

In another study, ¹⁰ researchers found they could tell which participants were friends, and they could tell how close the friendship was, based on their MRI results. People's thinking was similar, and the similarities were present regardless of gender, nationality, ethnicity, or age. It was even clear regardless of whether people were left or right-handed.

Even with all this similarity and the mutual effects of your people, your connections aren't constant. In fact, your networks turn over about every seven years. While your number of connections tends to stay relatively consistent, only about 48% of the specific people in your network are the same. ¹¹ The implication is that you must always be investing in relationships to sustain the people and groups who support you.

Key Points for Reflection

Here are important ideas to keep in mind from this chapter.

- Communities are predictable in terms of what people need to feel connected and for the group to thrive.
- The behavioral expectations and norms for communities are consistent across a wide range of groups and cultures.
- Communities are strongest when people have individual relationships across groups as well as interrelationships among group members as well.
- Being together in community affects motivation, energy, behaviors, choices, and more.

In the next chapter, we'll address the ways we interact as individuals within community.

Notes

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Chapter 5

Thriving as a Member of a Community

“The strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.”

~Rudyard Kipling, *The Law for the Wolves*

The Magic of Obligation

In addition to considering how communities operate, we can also explore our roles and experiences as members of the group. One important element is our obligation to each other. When we feel responsibility toward each other and act for the good of others as well as for ourselves, it's beneficial overall.

We talked before about how people have an instinct to matter and how work delivers a sense of purpose. This is also true of community more broadly. We want to matter to others, we want people to depend on us, and we want to be valued by the group for all that we contribute.

Both personal connections and continuity over time affect our sense of obligation to each other. When people interact in a more transactional way through social media or in a quick exchange with strangers, they may perceive less accountability for their behavior. Unfortunately, someone may not feel much responsibility to the clerk at the convenience store where they buy the Red Bull during a road trip, because they're unlikely to ever see that person again. But this can erode a sense of positivity, since we want to be a society that treats each other with courtesy, even when we interact with strangers.

On the other hand, if you're in community with group members or connected with neighbors, individuals and the group will have a long memory for how you've behaved over time, resulting in the development of your social reputation. When you have a positive social reputation, it's like a bank account. You make deposits to the goodwill balance through your actions and interactions. And then when you need a favor or help, you have a balance to draw from, and people will be more willing to support you.

Given this dynamic, continuity in a group has a positive impact on your own choices and how you behave, but it also has the benefit of creating greater opportunities to draw support from the group when you need it.

In line with this idea of accountability to ourselves and a community, studies have found that people behave differently when they are faced with their own reflection. Students ¹who were given an exam in a room that had a reflective surface on the wall were less likely to cheat. And children ²who were trick-or-treating on Halloween and invited to take one piece of candy from an un-manned bowl sitting on a porch were more likely to take just the one piece rather than a handful when there was a mirror present.

The hypothesis behind the finding is that when we're reminded of ourselves and our identity, we're more likely to act in pro-social ways. We'll be less likely to cheat or more likely to leave candy for others who come later.

The concept of the *tragedy of the commons* applies here. The classic sociological view is that if people behave only in their own self-interest, they will exhaust the resources of a group. But if people act with the good of the group in mind, balanced with their own needs, resources can be sustained for everyone.

A classic example is shepherds who allow their sheep to graze in a shared pasture. If each shepherd allows over-grazing by their herd, the pasture will be destroyed, but if each shepherd allows their sheep to graze only as much as they need, the pasture can be sustained for the whole community. During the pandemic, when people were over-purchasing toilet paper and other goods beyond their personal needs, they created a system of shortage where others couldn't get enough.

Another example of the importance of thinking beyond one's own needs is evident with a national grocery store chain. A new CEO took over the business after a decade of flat financial results and two years of plummeting shareholder returns. He replaced under-performing leaders, implemented development programs for employees, instituted reward and recognition programs, ensured people were paid fairly, and sought to ensure a culture of both accountability and recognition.

In addition to focusing on performance, he also focused on a campaign of “People First.” But he was clear that the focus wasn't on “person first” but truly on “people first.” He wanted to ensure that while people were setting boundaries and respecting individual needs, they were also acting in the best interest of their team and the organization as a whole. People needed to show up, deliver great results, and support each other. The choices they made needed to balance their own needs with those of other employees and the customers as well.

While some employees struggled with the emphasis on accountability, overall metrics improved. The company's engagement scores doubled, and their ratings on Glassdoor increased substantially. In addition, the company saw a steep increase in financial performance. There is a range of variables that have driven the shifts, but reinforcing a community that respects both individuals and the group is certainly part of the formula for success.

The Matter of Identity

Identity is also closely related to connections, community, and the esteem that is a part of mental health. You don't get a sense of belonging just from being around other people, but rather, from a shared sense of social identity. Belonging is based on sharing something that matters, and it is based on a sense that we offer each other mutual aid and protection.

But what is *identity* ? It's how you understand yourself and what makes you, you, including traits like your ethnicity, race, religion, gender, and the like. It is also closely related to your connections with others in terms of how you come together to achieve a goal or a mutual purpose.

With a strong sense of identity, you're more likely to have greater confidence. Identity can also contribute to more intellectual risk taking. You're willing to open yourself up to multiple views, perspectives, and experiences because you have a strong sense of who you are as a foundation to learning more and enhancing your understanding of yourself and the world.

Identity is also relevant over time. Self-continuity is when you feel the same (or similar to) the person you were years ago or to how you expect to be in the future. It is a feeling of alignment or coherence between what you were then and how you perceive yourself today.

A strong sense of self-continuity is good for you. When you feel a connection to who you were in the past, you're more likely to have a sense of well-being, greater mental health, and emotional resilience. In addition, when you feel connected to your future self, you're more likely to make healthy eating choices ³ as well as financial decisions that benefit you in the longer term.

In particular, you'll make the best future choices when you can imagine your future self having similarities to your present self, and when you can view your future self both realistically, in as much detail as possible, and in a positive light. ⁴ When you feel more connected to your future self, and imagine that person as you, rather than a stranger or as a remote or out-of-reach person you tend to be empathetic toward that person (you!). This will influence your choices today.

Relationships can be part of this self-continuity, especially when we stay in touch with people for many years. The friend that you attended high school dances with is the same friend you see on social media as your sons or daughters are going to prom. Or the friend you run into at work is someone you've known longer than you've known your own children.

The types of friends you have can also contribute to self-continuity. You've been in numerous book groups over the years, but you always have a set of book-group friends who offer continuity in your concept of who you are, how you spend your time, and what you value. Ultimately, we tend to understand ourselves through others. Having a friend who exercises and has a healthy diet reinforces our own sense of wellness. Or having an activist friend reinforces our own sense of social responsibility.

Identity is also based on alignment of values. When you're in a situation where your identity doesn't align with your group, your work, or your responsibilities, it can create stress. If your friend group wants to party every night and do illegal drugs, and your values don't align with their actions, the misalignment can cause anxiety. Or if your work colleagues regularly slack off or underperform, and you're committed to excellence and follow-through, you may need distance from them in order to maintain a healthy identity.

A great example of this need for alignment is evident with Tanisha who worked for an accounting firm. She regularly led on-site audits with high-profile clients. Her company landed a huge contract with an oil and gas company, but Tanisha refused to work on the engagement. She was vehemently opposed to the client's tactics and their effects on the environment.

Fortunately, Tanisha worked for an organization that was people-centered, and she was assigned to another engagement, while other team members who didn't share her objections completed the work. It's an example of how Tanisha's sense of herself and her values didn't allow her to do certain work, and her choices were a strong expression of her identity.

Identity is also based on how people feel when they're with their friends. A common understanding is that we're friends with others based on how we feel about them, but the opposite is also true. We want to spend time with people and sustain friendships with others who leave us feeling good about ourselves. You have lunch with a coworker and come away both boosted and motivated because of your interaction. Or you take a walk with a neighbor and feel buoyed by the conversation and the encouragement they provided. The relationship we have with others is often based more on how we feel about ourselves than how we feel about our friends.

Another dynamic of identity is the ways that your friends are connected to each other. We've talked about how support systems are stronger when people know each other and in fact, stronger friendships are also characterized by tighter networks. The term *triadic closure* describes a situation in which someone has two friends who are also friends with each other. This interrelationship strengthens the identity that is associated with those closer friendships.

Another aspect of identity that arises from connections is the kinds of roles people have. In general, when people have more roles that give them a sense of purpose and meaning, they are more likely to be happy and fulfilled. Someone may be an accountant, but also a parent as well as an artist and an avid fisherman. All of these roles offer a sense of identity, and they enhance esteem, because they offer multiple ways of understanding ourselves. This healthy sense of identity that derives from multiple roles is known as *dimensionality*.

Dimensionality is especially powerful in driving fulfillment and satisfaction when it intersects with multiple aspects of life and when it is a vehicle for connecting people.

Abigail French offers a great example of dimensionality. She went to school for fashion and textile design, and she works as a sales leader in the contract furniture industry. Her role requires her to focus on the physical environment of the office, including colors, materials, and finishes within workspaces. She also loves to knit, sew, and quilt, and she co-founded an organization called NYC Sewciety. The mission of the group is to reduce waste and connect people in the joy of creation through modern day quilting bees. The community promotes environmental consciousness, diverts thousands of pounds of textiles from landfills, and offers a place for members to connect and belong.

Abigail regularly schedules time for people to gather and knit. In addition, she sponsors an annual benefit in which participants design quilts out of discarded textiles from the industry. People choose from the repurposed materials and sew

quilts themselves or draw their designs for others to sew later. Then, the finished quilts are sold at an auction. The money from the auction is donated to DIFFA, which is a charity with a mission to fight AIDS within the design industry.

Abigail's story is a perfect example of how her interests overlap with her work and the issues she cares about, and how her passions are a catalyst to bring people together in community.

Beyond healthy dimensionality, it's possible for roles to become too central. If one particular role takes on too much importance, it can reduce self-esteem because too much rides on that role. For example, if someone's work is all they have, and their job is eliminated by their company, it can be especially damaging. But if their work is critical to them along with a volunteer role, a parenting role, and a caregiving role, it can mitigate the negative outcomes if any one of the roles is threatened. It's still painful to lose an avenue for our identity (and income!), but it's helpful to have a greater number of ways we find meaning.

In addition to the number of connections we have and the nature of our roles, identity is also related to membership in a group. It's not just how many friends someone has, but also the groups someone belongs to. Groups offer a sense of identity because they provide meaning and support and they help people to feel empowered. ⁵

One research effort ⁶performed multiple studies across the U.S., China, and Australia and looked at children, parents, university students, older adults, and adults who were living in shelters. Overwhelmingly, across their various life experiences, people's self-esteem was enhanced by membership in multiple groups. Examples are children who were part of athletic teams as well as chess clubs, adults who were members of ham radio clubs and motorcycle maintenance groups, and older people who attended chair exercise classes as well as dinner clubs.

In addition, when people felt worthy of being part of a group and glad to belong, their identity was stronger. Membership in multiple groups provided people with a sense of collective self-esteem, because their view of themselves was complemented by the reflection of others who were important to them and who shared common goals or interests.

A colleague said one time, "A strong culture is when I can see myself in you, and you can see yourself in me." It's a brilliant way to describe the experience of belonging and the identity that comes from group membership. Or consider Groucho Marx' famous line, "I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member." The humor of the quote is in how people understand their group and their identity. When people are proud of the group, they feel a sense of pride in themselves as members as well. Community offers identity. It is a rudder.

Group membership also contributes to identity because of the perception of a shared outlook. When individuals have opinions or perceptions, and those are reinforced by the group, it increases a sense of confidence in that view, and therefore esteem. Groups give rise to identity when people have a psychological association with the group, beyond just showing up. They think of the group as defining who they are as a person.

People's sense of identity is also strengthened when a group experiences a *common enemy phenomenon*. In this situation, people band together against challenges that are external to the group, which can result in a deep sense of bonding.

Consider the classic story of the group of school children who go on a camping trip. At first, they compete and disagree, but when a terrible storm comes up and threatens their campsite, they band together to save the tents and the supplies that are blowing away. They overcome their differences and disagreements in the face of a threat where they need to unite for the good of the group.

Another example of the common enemy phenomenon comes from the corporate world. An IT team at a global media organization was experiencing a lot of conflict and backbiting within their intensely political corporate environment. All the team members were fairly miserable.

But then they had to face a serious cyber-attack. In order to respond, they had to act quickly and work intensively together day and night. The FBI was involved because the attackers had demanded a ransom, and the team had to work intensively to find, fix, and mitigate the damage as well as prevent additional damage. While the threat from the cyber-attack was terrible, they collaborated to literally save the company. The bonds they created in the process have been long lasting.

A common enemy can cause positive bonding within a group, but it can also cause harm if the common enemy is defined based on unfair biases or prejudices. As we've said, feeling bonded with your people releases the brain chemical oxytocin. But oxytocin can also cause people to behave to protect the group from outsiders or perceived threats. This works well when the threat is a storm or a cyber issue, but it can get in the way of groups working effectively with others if it tips into mistreatment of other individuals or groups, or if it insulates the group from healthy outside perspectives or influences.

Another element of group identity is religion. After many years of steady decline, religious affiliation is plateauing, and more people are reporting they adhere to religious practices. ⁷When people are deeply religious, it is typically for personal, spiritual, and social reasons. Religious belief can provide a sense of purpose, meaning, and a larger context for life, answering existential questions. It can also offer both hope and resilience as well as a moral compass and clarity for decision-making and behavior. And it can provide a basis for forgiveness as well as trust in a higher power.

Religion is also considerably positive for connection, community, and reduced loneliness. And it is correlated with happiness and health. ⁸Researchers believe that religion has a positive effect on belonging and well-being because of the identity and shared belief systems people have in common. In addition, they believe that religion has positive effects because of the participation and social elements of attendance, and the feelings of belonging that result.

A sense of group identity can also be linked with the regions where people live. One study ⁹found that when people moved to a new area, they were most likely to commit to the region and identify with it when they had close personal connections there. Just moving to a new place didn't necessarily result in identification with the region. It took personal relationships, connections, and local friends to create that sense of identity.

Connections are important, and roles are important. But group membership is also critical as a way for people to understand themselves and solidify a healthy sense of identity. Groups provide for belonging as well as a sense of purpose

and meaning, and they offer greater levels of support.

Ultimately, a strong sense of identity can buttress self-esteem and health. People with a stronger identity are more likely to feel motivated and in control of their circumstances, and they're more likely to feel a sense of ownership or pride in their accomplishments. And a strong sense of identity provides the foundation from which you can support others. When you're feeling your own strength, you can lend it to the community.

Birds of a Feather

Another dynamic of our relationship to others within our communities is the time we invest as well as our similarities and differences.

We want to spend time with friends, and how many relationships we can maintain is based on time. It is also based on the size of our brains. Research ¹⁰ found that we can have about 150 friends. In addition, there are predictable numbers of friends in different circles of closeness. We tend to have one to five people who are romantic partners, close family, or best friends. These are the people we can go to if we have a big problem or need comfort. They are the people who are there in hard times and who have our backs.

The next group of about 10–15 friends includes good friends who also offer support and with whom we spend substantive time. Outside of that circle, we typically have about 40–50 people we think of as friends and 120–150 with whom we also feel connected. For this largest group, you know what's going on in their lives, recall previous discussions, understand their relationship to others, and feel like you can sit down and chat anytime.

In addition to the number of friends we have, we also tend to choose connections with people who are more similar to ourselves. The old saying is true, “birds of a feather flock together.”

There is evidence for this preference based on a study of people in groups and who they chose to spend time with. In the study, ¹¹ if people were in a smaller group, they made friends with those who were available, including those who were less similar to themselves. But when people were in a larger group with greater variety of members, people chose to spend time and make friends with others who were more similar to themselves. With less variety, you'll take what you can get in terms of friends, but when given the chance, you'll flock to those who are more like you.

Reinforcing this notion is evidence for seven key factors that drive the likelihood that people will be friends and whether their friendship will be deeper or longer lasting. ¹² These variables include sharing the same taste in music, similar senses of humor, dialect, hobbies and interests, religious views and moral views, and career trajectories. When people share more of these attributes in common, they are more likely to be attracted to each other and want to spend time together. And they will tend to invest in their relationship over the longer term.

Career trajectory as a pillar of friendship is especially relevant because profession is often proxy for personality. We choose the work we do based on many factors, but our interests and proclivities are paramount. Analytical people who love numbers are more likely to work in finance. Those who are creative may aim toward design professions, or those who are outgoing tend to be over-represented in sales. It makes sense that similarity in careers would be a pillar of friendship not only because you share similar experiences and vernacular, but also because your personalities and preferences may be more similar as well.

In one study, ¹³ researchers compared the big five personality characteristics of openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism with 263 different occupations among more than 68,000 people.

They found that those who reported the highest levels of extroversion (associated with assertiveness, sociability, and greater desire for stimulation) were most likely to be employed in advertising, public relations, management, or event planning. Those who were highest on openness (reflected in a person who is more creative, imaginative, and curious) were most likely to be employed as artists, teachers, professors, writers, or researchers.

Those with higher scores on agreeableness (associated with empathy, cooperation, and trustworthiness) tended to be employed as psychologists, religious professionals, health professionals, and speech therapists. And those who scored highest on conscientiousness (characterized as more organized, goal-directed, and responsible) were most likely to have occupations as engineers, dental assistants, construction managers, or finance managers.

Personality and profession also tend to influence each other. We choose our work based on our styles and preferences, but we're also selected for jobs by leaders, teams, and organizations. Because people prefer similarities, they may choose teammates who are more like them. In addition, work shapes people. If you're an introvert in a highly extroverted sales job, you will likely adapt to the need for greater extroversion in order to be successful. With all of these dynamics at play, it makes sense there is correlation between people's attributes and their jobs.

But there is also a downside to high levels of similarity in groups. Unfortunately, when relationships are more homogenous, without enough variety in who is part of the group, it can be limiting. People in homogenous groups have less exposure to different points of view, perspectives, or experiences. They also have reduced access to information from dissimilar sources. This can, in turn, drive attitudes that are less open or accepting, and that are more prejudiced and less empathetic toward others. ¹⁴

On the other hand, if members of groups don't share enough in common and there is too much diversity, they can lack a sense of connection or cohesion, resulting in less support for each other. It turns out there's a sweet spot in how much time people spend with those who are similar to them (referred to *homophily*), as well as different from them (defined as *heterophily*). There are benefits to both.

A study ¹⁵ of 20,000 people across 10,000 neighborhoods compared people's well-being and happiness to the diversity of their networks in terms of age, education, income, and race. The research found there was an optimal level of about 50%

diversity. When about half of their network was made up of those who were different than they were, people experienced the greatest well-being and satisfaction.

Specifically, with the optimal level of diversity in the neighborhood, people had the highest levels of neighborhood cohesion, which provided a sense of community, social interaction, and connection to neighbors. They felt like they belonged, and they appreciated being able to talk regularly, get advice, or borrow things from their neighbors. They reported that they valued their local friends, and they planned to remain in the neighborhood.

They also had the highest levels of overall satisfaction with life and the best reports of psychological well-being. They were less likely to lose sleep because of worry and less likely to have unhappiness or depression get in the way of their enjoyment of daily activities. This also reinforces the studies I shared earlier in which Nobel Laureates were more likely to have greater diversity in their networks as well, demonstrating the variety of ways diversity is beneficial in relationships.

Overall, there are terrific benefits in having close relationships with those who are similar to you, but there are also benefits of interacting with those who bring different points of view, perspectives, experiences, and opinions. A balance of both is best.

Cognitive Biases

Another way that our social relationships operate is based on the shortcuts we use in our thinking processes, called *cognitive biases*. We talked earlier about the cognitive shortcuts that affect how we think. They cause us to be selective in what we pay attention to and the information we bring into our awareness and processing. They introduce subjectivity in how we understand, choose, decide, and interact. They incorporate our feelings, tastes, or personal opinions rather than relying on purely objective data.

But the nature of cognitive bias is also that we fool ourselves. We may believe we're relying on objective or observable facts, when really our shortcuts are guiding us to conclusions that are influenced by our biases.

Certain types of cognitive bias affect our relationships, friendships, and interactions. Earlier in discussing dynamics of connections in social media, we discussed attentional bias, the exposure effect, and recency bias. Here are several others that also shape how we conceive of relationships.

With the *halo effect*, people tend to see one positive aspect of someone and extend that to opinions about other traits. A friend might be very honest and trustworthy, so we assume they are also good at follow-up and follow-through, even if we don't have evidence about these particular attributes.

The *affinity bias* speaks to how people tend to feel more positively toward those whom they believe are more similar to themselves or who remind them of themselves. An intern reminds a senior leader of themselves at that age; the senior leader takes the intern under their wing, providing mentoring and guidance. Or a woman invites an acquaintance into her gardening group because she feels an affinity with her.

Closely related to the affinity bias is the *familiarity bias* or the *exposure effect* in which things that are more familiar or those we're exposed to more frequently tend to be more acceptable. We talked about the exposure effect when we discussed the impact of social media earlier. But this bias also operates for food, art, music, and people. The more you're familiar with something or someone, the more likely you are to feel positively about it or them.

In an example of the exposure effect, a new song by Outkast was launched in 2003. It was called "Hey Ya." Radio stations played the song regularly, and they sandwiched it between songs that were already popular and familiar. This approach is credited with launching "Hey Ya" to great commercial success, spending nine weeks at number one on the billboard charts and achieving popularity globally from Australia to Sweden.

The *intentionality bias* leads people to believe that all human behavior is intentional, rather than believing some behavior is unintentional, unconscious, or even accidental. This kind of bias can result in risks to interpersonal relationships, because it can cause negative reactions or conflict. When someone fails to say hello, a coworker may interpret the miss as a deliberate act of disrespect, rather than simply the colleague failing to see them. Or if someone leaves a friend out of a gathering, the act could be interpreted as an intentional betrayal, rather than just forgetfulness.

It's natural to attribute motives to the people around us, and we're more accepting when we're both familiar with someone and exposed to them regularly. For example, the person we see more often is someone we probably know more about. We chat as we're walking into work, or we exchange pleasantries as we're laying out our mats for yoga class.

By getting to know someone, we can attribute motives that are more generous and more accurate. If we see someone at work with a scowl on their face, we're less likely to decide they are grumpy, because we know they're probably just thinking about the stressful project they're in the middle of. Or if our acquaintance comes to early-bird spin class and isn't talkative with us, we know they're probably just tired, because they just got a new puppy and probably didn't sleep much the night before.

The *availability heuristic* is another cognitive bias that is relevant in relationships. It suggests that things that happened more recently or more regularly are those we recall most easily. This is similar to our earlier discussion about the recency bias. It also has implications for how we interact and stay in touch. The friend you see every week at the club or in the office is the person you reach out to for coffee because they are top of mind. But the person you haven't seen in weeks because she works remote won't come to mind as quickly when you're considering who to invite onto the project team.

Likability is another element of bias in relationships and interactions. When we're more likable, we tend to have a greater influence on others. It's logical: People feel good about the interaction they've had with us, and feel good about themselves, and they're more likely to do what we ask.

Likability works in favor of both men and women. But unfortunately, being unlikable works against women. In one study, ¹⁶ experiments found that if men were not likeable, people weren't thrilled to work with them, but they didn't necessarily withdraw support or cooperation. On the other hand, in cases where women were perceived as less likable, people were more likely to act with less cooperation and show reduced support for the woman's ideas, requests, or directives.

We also have a bias for *association*. Your friends, family, and trusted colleagues influence you, but you're also more influenced by a friend of a friend. This is the power of the network. If someone reaches out to you cold, with no connection, and asks for your time or a favor, you'll be less likely to engage with them. But if they were recommended by a friend or if they refer to a friend, you'll be much more likely to respond positively. For example, on LinkedIn when someone asks you to do a networking call or have virtual coffee, you may ghost them or say no. But if another contact introduces you, or the person references a friend you know and trust, you'll be more likely to give them your time.

This is the concept behind net promoter scores or NPS. These have become popular metrics for businesses to gauge customer satisfaction and loyalty. Using NPS, customers are asked one question in evaluation of the product or service: would they be likely to recommend the product or service to their friend. When they are, it's one of the best assessments of their satisfaction and loyalty. Because we only recommend to our friends when we're really satisfied. We want our friends to have positive experiences, and they trust us, so we'll only be likely to recommend when we've had a positive experience ourselves.

We understand this intuitively, so we're more likely to trust and be influenced by people who know our people and who are recommended by our people. It's the old adage, "Any friend of yours is a friend of mine."

Overall, cognitive biases affect relationships appreciably, and the processes for how we relate and interact are complex. But even with all the elements of cognitive bias and influence, chemistry is still a thing. You know how this feels: You click with someone, and you feel like you can read each other's minds or talk with them for hours.

Research has determined it isn't just your imagination. It's something real. It's called the *click factor* or the *clicking model* of relationships. It's been demonstrated in studies ¹⁷ which found that while relationships can evolve over time and based on hours of investment, there is also a dynamic in which people feel a more immediate connection. The study found a click was more likely when people were available and accessible to each other, when they conformed to social norms, when they were responsive in a conversation, and when they provided resources and support.

It's a both-and in which relationships are formed and then deepen over time, as we discussed earlier. But you can also experience an immediate click or chemistry match with someone, which motivates you to spend more time and build the relationship as well.

How Trust Is Built

Trust is another critical element of connections and the ways that we experience relationships and community.

High profile cases get our attention when they feature betrayals of trust. From the Ponzi scheme to the online romance that swindled someone out of their fortune, they may seem like the norm. But positive relationships in which it's safe to trust others are much more common, even if they don't make the news.

In fact, we prefer to trust, and trust is our first instinct. Experts believe that trust provided an evolutionary advantage, because those who trusted others created strong bonds with others, and groups were better able to survive than individuals alone.

The concept of *Perceived Partner Responsiveness (PPR)* is a helpful model to understand bonds. It's the idea that people will tend to have a more trusting and longer-lasting relationship, and greater levels of well-being and happiness, when their partner demonstrates three behaviors. First, a partner must understand them, second a partner must appreciate them, and third, a partner must validate them or care for them. ¹⁸

When people experienced more of these kinds of behaviors—understanding, validation, and responsiveness—they were more likely to feel trust and express themselves openly. They were also more likely to be more satisfied and therefore maintain relationships. ¹⁹

And while the research on PPR has been done on partnerships and marriage, it is also applicable to friendships. Listening to someone and understanding them, valuing them, and taking action to respond and support them are powerful contributors to trusting relationships.

Studies have also looked at how trust is built by leaders. Researchers ²⁰ found that leaders who were most trustworthy admitted their mistakes, appreciated others, and were open to learning.

You can also think of trust in terms of tasks and relationships, and whether you can trust people in one or both of these areas. *Task trust* is when you trust someone to follow-through, keep promises, get things done, and fulfill their commitments. *Relationship trust* is when you trust someone to keep a secret and act with sensitivity and empathy when you share vulnerabilities with them.

Consider dogs and pizza. When you have task trust, you would rely on someone to take care of your dog when you're out of town. They'll be responsible to show up, let the dog out, feed her, and take care of her. On the other hand, you probably also have friends that you love to have pizza with. They are the friends with whom you have relationship trust. You can let your hair down, talk about a sensitive topic, or open up about a problem. You know they'll listen, care, and keep your confidences.

In some relationships, you have both kinds of trust. But it's also possible to have relationships in which you have just one or the other. The colleague who can always be trusted to get the project done may not be someone you'd share your career aspirations with. Or the person you love doing pottery with is terrible at follow-through.

And trust is also related to consistency. We don't trust what we don't understand, and when someone's behavior doesn't make sense to us, we'll be less likely to trust them. You'll have the greatest trust with the people you can rely on to show up in a consistent way and who don't surprise you with unpredictable responses to you or the relationship.

We need all kinds of trusting relationships with partners, leaders, colleagues, and friends, but trust is also nuanced and layered in terms of how we experience others.

Key Points for Reflection

Here are important ideas to keep in mind from this chapter.

- Obligation and responsibility to others drive positive contributions to communities.
- Healthy identity is influenced by multiple dimensions of personal attributes as well as roles that we serve within a community.
- People tend to be drawn to others who are similar to themselves, but there is value in diversity in networks as well.
- We have a variety of cognitive biases that affect how we judge and interact with others.
- We build trust in relatively predictable ways that include sharing, transparency, and intentionality in relationships.

In [Part II](#), we shift gears from understanding our current challenges and the dynamics of social interactions to considering how we can create constructive relationships, increase connections, and reduce loneliness. We'll begin with how your own thinking affects your friendships.

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Part II

The Practice of Connecting

Chapter 6

Thinking as a Good Friend

“A friend is a gift you give yourself.”

~Robert Louis Stevenson

Making Your People Your Priority

The challenges of loneliness and the absence of friends are sobering. But the evidence for the power of connections and the knowledge of how it all works can be tremendously empowering. We want friends, we crave connections, and we're better in community.

Friendship is a high priority for the majority of people. In one survey, ¹61% of people said friendship was crucial. There were other factors that also mattered to a good life, as well. In fact, 26% said having children was a priority, while 24% believed money would have the biggest payback, and 23% wanted a great marriage. But friendship ranked highest in terms of what people wanted and how they thought they could achieve happiness and fulfillment.

It's possible to create the conditions for the fulfillment that arises from strong relationships. In this part of the book, we'll discuss plenty of strategies for connectedness. But this isn't a self-help book, so there are no easy formulas.

There are lots of places you can focus your energy to build your relationships and your community, but you won't want to do everything. Avoid becoming overwhelmed. Instead, marinate in the information and reflect. The ideas that stick with you are likely the best places for improvement. Then, personalize and assess where you think you can improve and what you might do even better than how you approach things today.

Select one or two items to focus on in the short term, and then check in with yourself in several months to see how you're doing. From there, you can choose to continue your focus on those same items, or you can choose additional areas to work on.

When you want to improve or make change, less is more. If you try to take on too much, and say “yes” to everything, you'll be saying “no” to all of it. Your focus will be too diffuse, and you won't be able to do any of it well enough. You'll have better success tackling a couple of things and accomplishing your goals with those and then adding the next opportunities for improvement after that.

A CEO at a small manufacturing company used to gather with all his leaders every year. At the annual retreat, they would connect and celebrate their wins and their accomplishments. As part of the program, he would ask subgroups to identify actionable ideas for improvement. The full group would plot the alternatives on a two-by-two matrix, judging each based on effort (what it would take to achieve) and impact (the extent of its positive impact on people and the business).

Ideas that would take a lot of effort and have a lot of impact were *big goals*. Those that were low effort with a lot of impact were *low-hanging fruit*. Those that wouldn't take much effort but also had little impact were items to *watch for future potential*, and those that were high effort and little impact were obvious choices to *avoid*.

You can take a similar approach, assessing your potential actions based on effort and impact.

Beyond the effort-impact assessment, the CEO continued the activity. From the big goals and low-hanging fruit, the group voted on their top choices for the next year and arrived at long list of potential actions. Then, with the list of top items in front of the whole group, the CEO would use a red marker and draw a line after the top five ideas. He wanted the group to focus their energy on these few shared goals and reduce the distractions that would be created if they focused on too many actions. The others were great ideas too, and the group could address them after they finished the top five.

You can think about the actions for making friends and creating connections this way as well. Lots of ideas, plans, and intentions are good, but focusing on a few at a time is even better, because your focus will enhance the chances of success.

Agency and Structure

While personal action is important, we also need to empower mutual effort, building community together. We talked earlier about the way loneliness is a signal of a larger pattern in how we interact as a society. As a result, part of the solution must be collective as well. Empower yourself for individual action but also work with others.

Embrace your own power and influence. The primary way people learn, sociologically speaking, is through watching other people, listening to them, and experiencing them. As a result, how you behave, interact, and relate are powerfully influential to those around you. Through your own choices, you're inherently affecting others.

But while agency is the idea that individuals have the capacity to make their own decisions and take action to affect their personal circumstances, it's also necessary to acknowledge the power of structure. Structure refers to the broader social patterns, organizations, and institutions that affect and constrain personal choices. This book admittedly focuses on agency-level solutions, but you can explore structural solutions outside the boundaries of this book.

For example, to solve loneliness at a structural level, a STEEP framework is helpful. It guides thinking toward social, technical, economic, environmental, and political areas. With this lens, we would explore solutions like investing in community places like libraries or parks or updating zoning laws to make cities more walkable. Structural solutions could

also include shifts in work policies like right-to-disconnect laws or methods for companies to hold themselves accountable for social cohesion or psychological safety. Funding for community organizations that offer mutual aid or boost community health would also be examples of structural solutions. Ensuring doctors understand the power of connections so they prescribe social solutions along with traditional medical interventions are examples, as are regulations of digital platforms.

Beyond the factors in a framework like STEEP, we must embrace both structure and agency. Cruel optimism is an over-emphasis on agency, which can be disempowering. We can do our best and choose our attitudes and responses, but societies, cultures, patterns, and norms also have a role to play and cannot be ignored. Authentic optimism embraces both agency and empowerment as well as an appreciation for the larger schemes that we must affect.

With this balance in mind, we'll focus on the power of individual agency and the influence we have on each other, knowing structural issues are also relevant to the discussion in broader contexts.

How Self-Awareness Drives Interactions

When you're thinking as a good friend, you're considering your own framing and approach and how these affect your relationships.

Linguistic determinism is the concept in which the words we use to define and think about things affects how we make sense of them and how we choose and behave as a result. Language can both define and confine our understanding of issues. For example, if you “have to pick up the kids from soccer,” it can set a different emotional tone than if you “get to pick up the kids from soccer.” Or when you “spend” time, you may feel differently about the activity than if you “invest” time. All this is to say that how we think about ourselves and our role in friendship is a factor in how we make sense of our presence and activities.

And as you're setting the tone for friendship, remembering the sign in the cafeteria at your kids' summer camp is right on target. “To have a friend, you have to be a friend.” One of the first ways to make friends and create connections is to bring your best to relationships. To do this, your own self-awareness is key. Self-awareness is a matter of being in tune with your own emotions, triggers, preferences, and inner dialogue.

But self-awareness also involves attending to how you're perceived by others. Intent doesn't always align with your impact, and classic wisdom on emotional intelligence recommends you stay in touch with how you're feeling and how you're behaving with others.

The Johari window is a little-known classic model for understanding yourself and how you're coming across. The concept was developed in 1955, and it can be used to guide self-reflection or to prompt a discussion with a close friend or a personal coach to spur growth and development in personal relationships.

Specifically, the two-by-two model plots information that is known to the self and known to others. Information that is known to both self and others is in the *open area*. Information known only to self is called the *façade*. It is private. Information known to neither self nor others is *unknown* and information known to others and not to the self is the *blind spot*.

A greater open area, in which information is known to both self and others, can be the basis for trust and deeper relationships. You understand yourself and you share openly, so people understand you. On the other hand, blind spots can get in your way. Perhaps you think you're a good listener, but you constantly interrupt, or you look at your device while others are talking. You may not be aware of these behaviors, but others are.

You can use the Johari model to build self-awareness through reflection, considering what you share and how you're perceived. You can also use it to start a dialogue with a friend, asking for feedback to increase your understanding about the behaviors that could be helping or hindering trust and relationship-building.

Comparing Experience and Expectations

Expectations are another aspect of how we think about friendship and, as a result, how we interact with others.

First, we tend to get what we expect. Instead of the adage that “seeing is believing,” in actuality, we tend to find more of what we expect to see. Research in various fields has proven this effect. ² In medicine, people taking a placebo experience relief from their symptoms. In education, the students whom teachers believe to be smarter tend to be evaluated more positively and get better grades. And in the criminal justice system, when juries know that a prosecutor has a higher conviction rate, the jury is more likely to convict a defendant.

While many factors are at play, scientists believe that expectations drive subtle changes in behaviors and decision-making, which then drive outcomes. A teacher who believes a child is a better student will be more likely to notice when they are listening and paying attention, giving less attention to situations when they are distracted. Or the teacher will be more likely to attribute the child's mistake to a bad day rather than innate ability.

Another dynamic of expectation is how it relates to experience. Consider going to hear a speaker at a conference. You'll have certain expectations based on the description of the session, their bio, and their brand. At the session, they'll talk about their topic, share their knowledge, and take questions from the audience.

If your expectation was high and your experience of their session didn't measure up, you'll be disappointed. On the other hand, if your expectation and your experience were aligned, you'll likely be satisfied. And if your expectation was low and your experience of the speaker was better than you thought it would be, you'll be delighted.

In these situations, your experience didn't change, but its relationship to your expectation did. For this reason, if expectations are too high, you can set yourself up for disappointment. If you expect a friend to call you every day to check

in when you're sick, and they aren't available to provide that much support, you may be disappointed.

You're wise to be conservative in your expectations, so you don't set your friend up for disappointment with unreasonable hopes.

Another way to think about expectations is with their absence. Dr. Shinichi Suzuki (1898–1998) was a Japanese violinist known for teaching young children to play violin without reading music. His philosophy included setting a positive learning environment with a caring teacher and a nurturing parent, as well having the child listen to many hours of the music they were learning. And he believed in developing not only musical ability, but also character.

Within communities of teachers, parents, and children of the Suzuki method, there was an often-repeated story of a young girl who came to Dr. Suzuki and wanted to play the violin. Because of a deformity at birth, she didn't have the use of her left arm for fingering the notes. Dr. Suzuki's father ran the largest violin factory in the world at the time, so Dr. Suzuki was able to create a violin that was designed opposite typical violins. It could rest on the right shoulder with the finger board accessible to the right hand, rather than the left. It allowed the girl to play in the opposite direction from what is typical, which allowed her to make music successfully.

Dr. Suzuki talked about how an absence of expectations created the conditions for a creative solution. This is also related to the Japanese concept of the “beginner's mind” in which it's possible to learn more when we're not limited by what we already think we know. Having high expectations or static expectations would have meant the girl had no chance of playing the violin, but his openness, or what he referred to as an absence of expectations, made room for unexpected solutions.

An absence of expectations can be a positive factor in friendship as well. When you avoid inflated expectations, you pave the way for delight. If you're making posters for a rally and not counting on your friend's support, you'll be delighted when she shows up with markers in-hand to help. Or if you avoid high hopes for the frequency of get-togethers, you'll be thrilled when your friend calls more than once a month to meet up.

When you have open expectations, you're also embracing the idea that you're co-creating a friendship. You may have a certain image in your mind about what friendship should be, but your friend does as well. And your friend may or may not have the capacity to meet your expectations. But if you imagine that you're fashioning the relationship together, rather than insisting that they conform to your picture of what's right, you'll enhance the likelihood of feeling fulfilled in the relationship.

As you deepen a relationship and build trust, it's natural to increasingly rely on friends and build the belief that they'll always come through for you. But staying open to possibilities and ensuring you're not putting too many demands on the relationship is also healthy.

It's also wise to consider the ways friends meet your needs. In fact, few people are able to meet all your needs, and it's healthy to have different friends you can go to for different kinds of support. Your fun-loving friend is great to take to the concert, but you wouldn't share your deep secrets with him. And your opinionated friend is wonderful to spend time with going to lectures but would be a drag when you're boating.

Another way to ensure success in friendship is to expect the right kinds of support and interaction from the right friends. To expect your always-on-the-go friend to stop over for a quiet card game once a week will only disappoint you, and them.

Expectation is a balance. You're more likely to get what you expect, and you'll certainly want to leave the door open for the relationship to build and develop beyond its current status. But you'll also want to match your expectations with your person and to spread your needs across different friends.

Valuing Time Alone

Another way to enhance relationships is to ensure you're giving yourself space and spending time by yourself. This is also part of thinking as a good friend. Give yourself time to reflect and be on your own. Define time alone as not only acceptable, but helpful.

It may seem counter-intuitive but being on your own can be rejuvenating and grounding. In our always-on, social society there is pressure to be with others much of the time. But it's wise to manage your own boundaries and take time away when you need to.

We all have differing needs in the time we spend alone, so check in with yourself about how much time alone is just right for you. A study ³ found that when people took time to be alone by their own choice, they increased their self-esteem. Ironically, they also reported less loneliness. When you're alone, you can wonder, solve problems, and enhance your own sense of capability and independence. These can enhance your confidence and self-possession in relationships with others.

You can also enhance your productivity by working alone. ⁴ In fact, working at your own pace can be an especially effective approach for better outcomes. We talked before about the differences between being alone and feeling lonely, and they apply here as well. Your beliefs matter, as well as how much control you have over being alone.

You can empower yourself to make your own choices about how you spend your time and embrace the benefits of solitude.

Key Points for Reflection

Here are important ideas to keep in mind from this chapter.

- To create connections, it will be important to act with intention. But it's also critical to avoid overwhelm by setting a few key priorities, rather than trying to do too much.
- Both agency and structure are important to consider in building strong communities.

- Self-awareness is a starting point for great relationships.
- Your own expectations will affect your experiences with friends, so be aware of expectations and manage them effectively.
- While connections are critical, time alone is also valuable, so you can be your best.

Next, we'll turn to what you bring to relationships and how you can act to catalyze and nurture friendships.

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Chapter 7

Acting as a Good Friend

“Plant a seed of friendship; reap a bouquet of happiness.”

~Lois L. Kaufman

Courage and Initiative

One of the first elements of friendship is to reach out and take initiative. We've talked about how this can be hard to do, especially if you're lonely. But ironically, the more difficult it is, the more critical it may be. Expanding friendships requires you to reach out.

As we've said, we mistakenly assume others don't want to engage, but people want and need relationships, and this is a powerful foundation for you to take action and initiative with others. You may lack confidence or capability, but each time you open a conversation with someone you'll get better at it. When you strive to remember someone's name, you'll strengthen your recall. And when you make an invitation to get together for smoothies, you'll set yourself up for success the next time you want to initiate.

In addition, if you receive an invitation from someone else, you're also wise to say yes more than you say no. You need to manage your boundaries, and you may choose to decline if you have too many friends or not enough time. But generally speaking, saying yes gives you a wonderful opportunity to expand your network, connect more broadly, and explore a potential relationship.

Openness and Humility

Acting as a good friend also encompasses how you bring yourself to the relationship and how you show up for others. A primary way to come into friendship is with a sense of openness.

Consider the concept of *intellectual humility* which is when you're open and don't assume you have all the answers. Intellectual humility is characterized by asking questions, listening, and embracing a willingness to learn from your friend's point of view, even if you disagree. Intellectual humility is good for you, because you can learn from others and develop your relationship, but it is also influential.

We value those who have clear opinions and points of view, and those we can read and understand easily. But we also want to know we're valued, and this is where humility comes in. We prefer people and are most influenced by those who are open to others' opinions. We value people who don't assume their opinion is perfectly correct. We are more influenced by people who are open to others' points of view, because they draw us in, demonstrate that they value our opinions, and invite ideas and perspectives.

Academic studies ¹ describe intellectual humility as a combination of a few factors including honesty, sincerity, thoughtfulness, and unselfishness. In addition, people are perceived as humble when they are open, curious, self-aware, and learning-oriented.

In addition, people with greater humility also tend to perform better in their jobs. ² And they are more likely to show support for others and help others. ³ In addition, when people were humble, they were more understanding toward others, and they were less judgmental. ⁴ They were also better at decision-making, because they more effectively assessed the evidence for arguments.

Consistency, Transparency, Authenticity, and Legibility

Another aspect of how we act as a good friend is by demonstrating authenticity, transparency, legibility, and consistency.

We want to interact with people who are authentic as well as transparent. While these concepts can be confused or conflated, they are actually separate. When people are *authentic*, they are completely themselves and there is alignment, or match, between what they say and what they do. With authenticity, people are being true versions of themselves.

On the other hand, if people's nonverbal behaviors or choices are a mismatch to what they profess, it will impede trust. For example, if someone says they value you, but regularly interrupt you when you're talking, your experience of them won't match what they say, and you'll feel less trusting or open toward them. Or if they say they love to spend time with you, but are perpetually late, you'll wonder about their authenticity.

Transparency also helps build relationships, and it's an indication of how much people reveal about themselves. It's when people are open about what they believe, why they believe as they do, and why they behave as they do. People who are transparent are clear in their communication. People tend to trust others who are more open.

In addition to authenticity and transparency, we also value legibility and consistency in relationships. *Legibility* means people are easy to read. We can understand them easily. People don't trust what they don't understand, and legibility enhances trust and closeness in relationships. Neurologically, we prefer predictability and shy away from ambiguity, and legibility gives us a greater sense of clarity.

We also prefer people who show up with consistency over time. When they don't, it can erode the relationship. Research with leaders and employees has found that people prefer a leader who is poor, but predictable, over a leader who is erratic. In the study, ⁵employees were exposed to supervisors who were always fair, sometimes fair, rarely fair, or never fair. Then the employees completed surveys about their reactions and experiences with the supervisors. When supervisors were inconsistent in their behavior, acting fairly sometimes and not others, people experienced more uncertainty, job dissatisfaction, stress, and emotional exhaustion compared to working with supervisors who were more consistent in their behavior.

In another study, ⁶people were exposed to supervisors who treated them abusively. For example, the supervisors would criticize them publicly, berate them, or blow up. Unsurprisingly, this kind of behavior resulted in negative experiences for the workers, but their reactions were even more negative if the supervisors tried to make up for their bad behavior by flipping over to being especially complimentary, reinforcing, effusive, or charming. And employees had the same reactions to this switching behavior whether they were experiencing it themselves or witnessing others going through it.

Another aspect of consistency is fairness: that is, consistency in how we people are treated. This too was tested in an experiment with leaders and employees. ⁷As you would expect, people preferred bosses who always treated others fairly, rather than those who treated people unfairly. But people also preferred those who were always unfair above those who were unpredictable in whether they treated others fairly. Consistency won the day.

People also prefer those who are consistently available, accessible, and responsive. This doesn't mean that we have to be on 24×7 , but if someone sends a text or calls us, they want to hear back. We want to know whether someone will respond. A study of almost 5,000 people across 20 countries ⁸ found that when leaders were present, accessible, visible, and responsive, they were most likely to generate trust and positive outcomes among their employees. These were the leaders who answered questions, made decisions, and provided input when people reached out.

Ultimately, consistency is critical to all kinds of relationships, including friendship. You'll want to be consistent in how you show up and act with your friends.

The Time It Takes

To be a great friend, you'll also have to be intentional and commit time to the relationship. The depth of friendship is partly based on the time you spend, so making a commitment is fundamental to building the relationship.

In parenting circles there is a saying, "Children spell 'love' T, I, M, E." Presence is critical, and you can't have quality time unless you have quantity of time. When you're together, topics emerge, you interact, and you have unplanned conversations. The same is true for adult relationships.

Research ⁹ shows that it takes about 60 hours of investment to make a friend, and the closeness of a relationship is linked with how much time friends spend together. When people spend less than 10 hours together, they are most likely to describe others as acquaintances. When they spend about 30 hours together, people describe others as casual friends. After 50 hours, people describe others as friends, and after about 140 hours, others are described as good friends. It takes about 300 hours to begin thinking of someone as a best friend.

The elapsed time matters too, and the research showed that even if people spent about 30 hours together over nine weeks, they would still only be acquaintances. Taken together, the studies showed that it takes about 40–60 hours to form a casual friendship over about six weeks after meeting someone.

The conditions of spending time together also matter. When people choose to be together, scheduling a lunch date or a walk together, they are much more likely to form friendships. This is in contrast to being together based on obligations like school or work. Friendships may form when we're in obligatory situations, but the choice to be together amplifies friendship even more.

Beyond the hours we spend, the nature of our interaction when we're together matters tremendously. When people spend time checking in, catching up on their lives, joking around, or talking about things with more meaning, they're more likely to develop friendships that are closer.

Time is consequential for relationships in many ways, and another is because it creates a boundary on how many close friends we can have. Time together demonstrates investment and caring for the relationship and for the other person. It is also a demonstration of choice. By choosing to spend time with someone, we're signaling that spending time with them is a higher priority at that moment than anything else we could choose to do or anyone else we would choose to do it with.

Jermaine retired recently and now splits his time between homes in two different states. He has been struggling with establishing community in each of the areas where he lives. He wants to tutor youth at an elementary school in Oklahoma, but is only in town during September and October. And he wants to attend a regular bible study at his church in Arizona but feels inadequately connected when he's there only a few winter months.

People love having him involved whenever he's able to contribute and attend, but his own emotional adjustment is a reflection of his understanding about the importance of presence, continuity, and consistency in forming relationships with groups and individuals.

Spending time with others is also a strategic choice psychologically. Whether we're thinking about it consciously or not, we're ultimately taking action that will increase our sense of belonging and connectedness, and this contributes to our well-being, happiness, and fulfillment. In sociological terms, when we invest more time, we expect to get more *resources* as a result. These resources can include a listening ear, empathetic support, or help if we're going through painful times.

The time we spend with friends is also related to well-being, including depression. A characteristic of depression is feeling separate, distanced, trapped, or unable to access the vibrancy of life. And as we've seen, loneliness is linked with depression

and mental health struggles. When people are depressed, the walls seem to close in, and life gets small. Getting out with friends, spending time with others, and talking together expands experiences and this in turn tends to reduce the social isolation that is associated with lower levels of well-being.

Groups are also related to this dynamic of time. When groups of friends spend time together, they gain efficiencies. An evening together watching sports drives conversations, laughter, and hours spent, not just with one other person, but with a few. In this way, cliques or friend groups are also powerful investments of time with payoffs for the development of relationships and belonging.

Another aspect of time in relationships is the continuity of our contact over time. Relationships work best when there is a regular cadence of contact. Perhaps you have an old friend you see every year for your true crime trip. Or you have a friend that you see for flower arranging once per month. These routines and regularities build trust and predictability in the relationship, meeting expectations for certain patterns of contact. On the other hand, if someone is unreliable or shows up randomly in your life, it can erode a relationship because you don't perceive they're making an investment or because they're not meeting your expectations for the amount of interaction you have.

Another element of relationships and the time we invest is being fully present. Attention is a scarce resource and people are distracted, contributing to their disconnection. But when others are tuned in, paying attention, and in-distractable, it builds relationships. When people are focused on us, we're also more likely to be influenced by them. Someone is taking the time to be with us, and this builds esteem and contributes to positive feelings about the other person.

One study¹⁰ following the pandemic asked people about the sizes of their networks and the nature of their connections. They found that 57% of people had reduced the number of people they stayed in touch with, and 48% reported they had intentionally dropped friends. In addition, 31% said they got a better sense for who they could count on. We talked earlier about the size of our brains and how the time we have available dictates how many friends we can reasonably invest in, stay in touch with, and feel connected to.

The dynamic of culling friends and being selective about friends is a useful strategy. When you think about the number of friends you have and whether you're able to commit the necessary time to friendship, it's wise to be selective about who you invest time with. Because for every moment you spend with a particular person or group, there is an opportunity cost in terms of those you're not choosing to be with.

Being choosy and spending time with the friends who nurture and support you is especially good for your well-being. We talked previously about how saying yes to invitations for friendship has positive impacts, but you also want to be intentional about saying no. By doing so, you're limiting your focus on the number of people you connect with. This may help you enhance your ability to spend quality time with each person or group, deepening those relationships and their rewards in the process.

Gratitude for Good

Another aspect of how you show up for others is related to gratitude. When you're appreciative, it's good for you, but it's also good for your relationships.

In studies,¹¹ when people thought about what they were grateful for and expressed their appreciation, they reported they were happier.¹² Additional research¹³ demonstrated that when people consciously reflected on what they were grateful for and wrote down what they appreciated in life, they were also more likely to say they were happy. Gratitude was also linked with patience.¹⁴ And another study,¹⁵ reported that when people felt more grateful, they exercised more and they were more likely to help others.

So being grateful matters but being on the receiving end of gratitude is also beneficial. Research¹⁶ found that people slept better, were healthier, and were more satisfied with their jobs when others expressed gratitude toward them at work.

Gratitude apparently affects how others perceive us as well. When people are seen as more grateful, they are also viewed as more friendly, thoughtful, and warm.¹⁷ Researchers believe this is because the characteristic of gratitude signals that the person would have the potential to have positive, lasting relationships. Gratitude has also been linked with empathy. Feeling grateful apparently helps us consider other's points of view and this is correlated with strong relationships and better connections.

But are some people naturally more thankful or appreciative? Actually, yes. There is a gene for gratitude, according to another study.¹⁸ The research tested people for a gratitude gene and then surveyed them about their relationship with their partner. Those with the gene reported greater levels of trust with their partner. They were also more satisfied with their marriage and tended to be more forgiving as well. And while this data is related to marriage, it certainly applies to all kinds of relationships.

Like so many aspects of personality and character, genes set you up for behaviors or proclivities, but your choices also matter, and you can be intentional about focusing on and expressing gratitude. Early philosophers recommended empowering ourselves with gratitude. Epicurus was credited with saying, "Do not spoil what you have by desiring what you have not. Remember that what you now have was once among the things you only hoped for."

Optimism and Hope

Another way your behaviors impact on relationships is through optimism. Like gratitude, optimism has tons of benefits for you, but also has advantages for your relationships with others.

A sweeping study of more than 70,000 participants ¹⁹ found that when people were optimistic, they tended to live longer, healthier lives. The researchers followed women for 10 years and men for 30 years. They asked respondents about their levels of optimism. Then, they compared their positivity to their health information.

Here's what they found: When people were more optimistic, they lived 11–15% longer compared with those who were less optimistic. In addition, those who were more optimistic were 50% more likely to live until age 85. The researchers compared the longevity data and health data across variables like education, age, and incidence of disease and depression. They also compared the participants' use of alcohol and habits relating to diet and exercise. They found that the effects of optimism applied regardless of these factors. Apparently, optimism may help people regulate emotions and respond more effectively to stress, thereby contributing to health and longevity.

People also prefer those who are more optimistic. We're attracted to others who are energetic, hopeful, and positive. Consider the server at a restaurant who is upbeat and whose service you especially appreciate. Or the presenter whose enthusiasm inspires you on an otherwise mundane topic. Passion can ignite energy and cause people to want to be in relationship with you.

But optimism must be genuine and not overdone. In fact, if you go too far, you can tip into *toxic positivity*, which is characterized by suppressing any negative emotion and ignoring reality. Staying unrealistically positive in every situation is unreasonable, and it can also be annoying to others.

Toxic positivity can detract from mental health, because if you're not letting yourself see problems, you rob yourself of the ability to respond or act to solve them. Deluding yourself can also leave you feeling isolated from others, because you're not sharing common experiences or frustrations. And toxic positivity can get in the way of relationships as well, since people may perceive that you're denying their worries, concerns, or stressors.

People prefer those who are genuine, and being falsely positive can send a message that you're tone deaf or out of touch, or worse, inauthentic or lacking integrity. And any of these perceptions can erode trust or cause people to avoid being in a relationship with you.

To find the balance with being optimistic and avoiding toxic positivity, you'll want to be sure you're staying aware of what's going on, including the challenges and opportunities around you. You can also focus on empathy as you consider what others might be feeling or thinking, so you can offer understanding, support, and compassion. Validating people and helping them to feel seen and heard has positive effects on relationships.

You can also avoid trying to change others' attitudes. If you aggressively try to impose your positivity on those around you, they're likely to feel devalued, and your attempts probably won't work anyway. It's better to ask questions, listen, and be there for them in more constructive ways than simply pushing unreasonable positivity.

Optimism is certainly a good thing, and positive energy will draw people to you. But like so many things, it's a matter of balance and degree, ensuring that positivity doesn't go too far.

Key Points for Reflection

Here are important ideas to keep in mind from this chapter.

- Approaching friends with openness and humility helps build relationships.
- Behaving with authenticity, transparency, legibility, and consistency is correlated with greater trust and longer-lasting relationships.
- Relationships take time, and the investment you make will affect how close your friendships become.
- Acting with gratitude, optimism, and hope all contribute to positive interactions with friends.

We've looked at how you frame friendship as well as what you bring to a relationship. Next, we'll turn to how you interact and the two-way relationships you can build.

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Chapter 8

Interacting as a Good Friend

“A friend is one who knows us, but loves us anyway.”

~Jerome Cummings

Empathy as Foundation

Beyond how you think and act as a friend, you'll also want to consider your interactions, including the give and take of friendship and the engagement and exchange that you have with friends.

Empathy is a foundation for relationships and constructive interaction. *Empathy* is when we can imagine what another person might be thinking (known as *cognitive empathy*) or feeling (known as *emotional empathy*). With this knowledge, we can then choose to express support and compassion. Experts believe that the experience of empathy is uniquely human. It contributes to the ability to relate socially and to think critically. And it has been extensively researched.

Empathy is a capability that is available to all humans, although we demonstrate it to greater or lesser degrees, depending on our personalities and the situations we're in. Neurologically, we mirror others. When we see someone having an experience, we have the same activation in our own brains as if we were having the experience ourselves.

For example, evidence shows that when people see a threat, they have a response in the anterior insula, putamen, and supramarginal gyrus parts of their brains. And when they see a friend experience a threat, they experience the same response, thus mirroring the experience. The closer the friend, the more likely the mirroring is to occur. ¹

Research ² with children offers additional proof that empathy is hardwired as part of human cognition. In a common study method, children are told a story about a child who knows where a toy is, but whose parent then hides the toy while the child is out of the room. Then, the children are asked where the child would look for the toy. When they say that the child would look for the toy in the location it was when before they left the room, it demonstrates they are putting themselves in the place of the child in the story, comprehending that the child wouldn't know the toy had been moved since they left. This is known as *theory of mind*, but it's also an expression of empathy and the ability for children to put themselves in the place of another person.

Empathy also affects cooperation. Another study ³ asked people to play a game in which they could choose to cooperate or not, and in which they assessed the reputations of others. The experiment also provided the opportunity for people to imagine what other players may be thinking or feeling. The results of the experiment found that the more they empathized, the more likely the participants were to cooperate.

In addition to being a fundamental dynamic in our relationships and communities, empathy also drives measurable results. In one survey, ⁴ when people experienced their leaders as empathetic, 61% said they were more personally innovative, compared to 13% who said they were innovative when they reported to less empathetic leaders. In addition, with empathetic leaders, 76% of people said they were personally engaged, compared with 32% who had less empathetic leaders.

And 57% of white women and 62% women of color said they were not likely to think of leaving their employer when they reported to leaders they considered to be empathetic. This was compared with 14% of white women and 30% of women of color who considered leaving when they reported to less empathetic leaders. And when people had empathetic leaders, 50% said they believed their workplace was inclusive, while only 17% felt their workplaces were inclusive when they reported to those who weren't perceived as empathetic. In terms of work-life, empathetic leaders also had an impact. Specifically, 86% of respondents said they could navigate the demands of work and life, compared with only 60% who worked for less empathetic leaders.

We can build empathy by nurturing relationships with those who are different from us. One study ⁵ found that when people had close-race friendships, they were better at perspective-taking, that is, putting themselves in others' shoes. They had an enhanced understanding of what others were going through.

In addition to building bonds with others who are different than you, another way to build empathy is to put yourself in a variety of situations. Travel is known to increase empathy, because experiencing a variety of cultures can help you build understanding about how people may live, work, or play differently.

Volunteering that allows for direct contact with others can be especially impactful. In addition, seeing someone struggling can activate mirror neurons, making you more empathetic in the moment and building empathy over time. Even reading fiction can build empathy, because it causes the reader to put themselves in the place of others and imagine what things must be like from a different perspective.

On two recent business trips, I had moments with people expressing empathy. In one experience, I was on a very early flight. I had gotten out of bed at 2:30 am in order to commute to the airport and board the plane on time. I was seated next to another woman, but we hadn't said hello, made eye contact, or interacted at all. As soon as I was on board, I bundled myself with my travel blanket and pillow and fell asleep.

When I awoke an hour later, I found a packet of airplane snacks in my seat pocket. “I got these for you,” said the woman next to me. While I was sleeping, the flight attendants had come around with refreshments, and the woman next to me had snagged the crackers for me.

In another experience, I was boarding my plane and headed to my usual window seat. I shlepped my roller bag into the overhead and signaled the gentleman already sitting in the aisle seat that I was in the window seat of his row. He nodded and stood up to let me in. As he did, he uncrossed the seatbelts on my seat, making it easier for me to sit down. It was such a small gesture, but demonstrated empathy, knowing that it can take a lot to smoosh into the row, stow the briefcase, and clear the seatbelts to sit down quickly.

Each of these were strangers, but they brought empathy into our interactions, considering what I was thinking and feeling and taking action to make things a touch better for me. These kinds of actions can help us feel more connected with both strangers and friends.

Increasing Inquiry

Inquiry is also critical and often underappreciated component of how we interact in relationships. We often think of how we're coming across, articulating our ideas, or persuading others, but another aspect of being in a relationship together is the process of exchange. Inquiry is an element in this formula.

Chris Argyris (1923–2013), a classic business thinker and professor, conceived of the *ladder of inference* in which we have experiences and then select information to pay attention to. From there we make assumptions and draw conclusions about people's beliefs, motivations, and drives. As we climb the ladder of inference, we're adding our own interpretations. But the information we choose to pay attention to is influenced by our own biases, and the assumptions we draw may not be accurate. To build a great relationship, we can resist drawing conclusions about people and use inquiry, asking questions regularly, to stay lower on the ladder of inference.

We talked earlier about how we can commonly ascribe motives to behavior, and climbing the ladder of inference is related to the conclusions that we draw. For example, if your boss frowns during a meeting, you can make the assumption he's angry with you. You're paying attention to the expression you see on his face and drawing conclusions about what it means. But you can resist going up the ladder and avoid reading into situations. If you ask questions, you may learn he's struggling with a problem unrelated to you, or that his frown was just a signal he was deep in thought, or even an indication that he was in physical pain. Importantly, none of these are related to you or your relationship with him.

Friendship is like this too. With inquiry, you ask people about their opinions, perspectives, ideas, and experiences, rather than jumping to conclusions. Staying low on the ladder of inference creates space for people to let you know what's going on, so you can interpret correctly and respond accordingly.

Leaning in and Listening

Of course, if you ask a question, the next step is to actually listen to your friend and their response. We are terribly distracted today, and attention is an extremely scarce resource. We're multi-tasking, thinking about many things at once, and failing to deeply reflect. Too often, we're not listening. Instead, while someone is talking, we're thinking of the next thing we want to say. Rather than this, you can focus on your friends and what they're sharing.

Good listening can help you remember what people say, because you're processing it more deeply. And this kind of listening can improve your work or personal performance as well, because you can respond, adjust, and take action based on a better understanding of what you've heard.

Active and supportive listening is also good for your friend. Research including more than 2,000 participants ⁶ asked people to complete a survey including questions about social support and specifically whether they had someone they could count on to listen when they needed to talk. Participants also had MRIs, and they completed cognitive tests.

Researchers found that when people had supportive listeners available, they were more likely to do better on cognitive performance tests and have greater cognitive resilience and brain volume. The opportunity to be heard and receive support from friends affected cognitive health and capability.

So how can you be a good listener to a friend? First, you can focus. With all that is coming at us these days, we are seriously distracted, and the presence of a device nearby, even if we're not looking at it, can cause us to lose focus. You can also do your best to turn off mental distractions and the conversations you may be having with yourself, including the mental multitasking you may be doing.

A lesser-known strategy to enhance listening is to move. In one study, ⁷ mice were tested for the ways their brains were engaged while they were hearing sounds. When mice were moving, they processed sounds more deeply.

To listen and more deeply engage, consider taking a walk with a friend, standing up if you're on a video call, or moving around while you're on the phone. You can also reward yourself for good listening, as that also worked for the mice in the study.

Another unique way of improving your listening and your empathy is to imagine and create word pictures while someone is talking. If someone is telling you about the experience they had at a concert, imagine the situation they are describing, whether it's the long line to get in, the energy of the crowd, or the dancing they did during their favorite song.

You can also use body language to enhance your listening. Lean forward, make eye contact, nod when it's appropriate, and keep your posture more open (avoid crossing your arms, for example). In addition to sending a message that you're listening to and validating a friend, these behaviors also send cues to your brain that it's time to focus.

Listening is most powerful in contributing to positive relationships when it includes not only mental processing, but the demonstration of understanding, validation, and caring in response to what your friend shares.

The Details of Generosity

Another aspect of how you interact is in paying attention to the details. Details may seem inconsequential, but when you're on time for your meeting or you've ordered your friend's favorite drink so it's ready when they arrive for happy hour, you're demonstrating attention that builds the relationship.

One way to signal your attention to detail is to check in with your friend when you know they have something going on. If your friend mentioned she's having knee surgery on September 8, you check in on September 7 to let her know you'll be thinking of her. Or if your friend has recently taken a new job, you send a text a couple weeks into her tenure to let her know that you hope it's going well for her.

The key is to check in with no strings attached. You're not looking for a conversation or a get-together, or for them to provide a detailed response, but you're letting them know they're on your mind and that you care.

Another way to interact effectively with friends is to demonstrate generosity. Zayd traveled regularly and received hotel keys in every location. His colleague, Yusuf, had a young niece who collected hotel keys, loving to play with them. Zayd saved his keys and gave them to Yusuf for his niece. When hotels started offering keyless entry, he still collected the keys as a gesture of caring and generosity.

Even when it's as trivial as hotel keys, behaving generously is linked with greater happiness, satisfaction, and even performance. One survey ⁸ analyzed people's habits using a validated scale of altruistic behaviors. ⁹ Generosity can be related to offering money, but it goes beyond financial donations to offering time, small courtesies, or kindnesses. Examples in the scale of altruistic behaviors are behaviors like offering directions to a stranger, donating clothes to a charity, or taking care of someone's pet without being paid. The study compared generosity scores to people's assessments of their satisfaction, number of friends, and sense of meaning with work and life.

There were big correlations between generosity and positive outcomes. In fact, 81% of people said they felt more meaning in life when they were more generous, in contrast to only 60% of those who were less generous. In addition, 74% of those who were generous felt satisfied with life, in contrast to 60% of those who were less generous. Generosity also played a role related to people and their work. Specifically, 70% of those who were more generous said they were satisfied with their careers, compared to 49% who were less generous. And 71% said they were satisfied with their companies, compared with 54% who were less generous.

When people were generous, they also tended to have more friends. Those who were generous had an average of 3.2 close friends in contrast with those who were less generous and had 2.6 friends. In addition, 78% of those who were generous were satisfied with their co-workers, in contrast with 62% who were less generous. And 71% were satisfied with their leader, compared to 59% who were less generous.

It makes sense, because when we're acting in a generous way, we're focusing on others and their needs, and this is related to happiness and fulfillment. When we're too focused on ourselves, it tends to detract from happiness, but when we focus on others and on making a contribution, it leads to greater fulfillment and joy.

This preference to contribute to others may be inborn. In another study, ¹⁰ researchers tested children who were 19 months old to see if they would share food with a stranger. The children were put in the testing situation during a time when they were due for a snack, so they were slightly hungry. Researchers made fruit available to the children. When the children witnessed a stranger who was acting as if he wanted fruit and couldn't reach it, the children recognized the person's need and offered their fruit to him, despite their own hunger. Researchers believe this is a demonstration of an inborn ability to recognize a need or a want in someone else and to overcome a personal need (their own hunger) to help someone else with a generous gesture.

In order to be generous with your own friends, stay attuned and sensitive to them. If your colleague mentions their car is in the shop, offer to drive them to work. Or if they're struggling with the development of the report, offer to take a look and provide suggestions. Also watch for opportunities to help strangers. We talked earlier about how in communities that are very dense, people can retreat socially, but no matter how many people are around and whether you're in a busy city situation or a quiet town setting, pay attention to those around you.

Travel situations seem to be a microcosm for human experience and another travel story provides color. I was in a busy airport, and there had been lots of weather delays. People were rushing to catch connecting flights in the midst of tons of people clogging walkways and gates.

As I walked to my gate, a young man rushed past me, clearly upset and racing to make his flight. As he ran, he didn't realize his backpack was slightly unzipped, and his clothing was falling out of it. A kind woman grabbed the dropped clothes and tried to yell to him. When she couldn't get his attention, she chased him in order to catch up and give him his things. He was practically weeping with relief as he not only made it to his connecting flight, but as the stranger handed him all the clothes he would have lost.

It was a big deal for him, obviously, and the woman felt good for helping. But the scene they created was also meaningful in a broader sense. People looked up, tuned in, and watched the situation unfold. We've talked about social contagion, and we know that the primary way people learn is through watching other people, listening to them, and experiencing how they interact. Demonstrations of this kind of behavior are powerful influences and sources of hope for how we treat each other in our better moments.

Generosity and attention to detail demonstrate caring and acknowledge the way you value a stranger or a friend. Feeling seen and known are parts of mental health, so even small actions can have a big impact. Gratitude is also part of the equation, since it is also correlated with happiness. Giving of yourself offers benefits of both generosity and gratitude.

Reciprocity and Its Rewards

Another fundamental aspect of friendship is *reciprocity* in which we exchange with others, giving back when someone gives to us. The exchange is one of the ways we show each other we care and demonstrate how we value the other person. In addition, when we perceive reciprocity, we build stronger relationships. For example, we help a friend on a project, and then they help us when we need it next. Or we suggest a puzzle night with our friend this week and our friend suggests it in a couple of weeks from now.

We have an instinct for reciprocity, and this was demonstrated in a study with servers and restaurant patrons. ¹¹ In the first portion of the experiment, servers delivered the check with a couple of mints. Compared to people who received no mints, those who received mints tipped 3% more. In a second condition, servers asked people if they wanted mints and then delivered them, resulting in 14% greater tip amounts. And in a third condition, the server brought another set of mints after providing the first set of mints. In this situation, tips increased 21% versus the groups who received no mints.

The test demonstrates the effects of goodwill, but also the social dynamics of obligation, personalization, and reciprocity. We have a social norm of obligation in which we feel more obligated to give back after we've received something. In addition, personalization was at play here. When the mints were provided because people said they wanted them, tips were higher than when they were delivered as a default. But also, when the server provided the mints, people were influenced to give in return, and this was true in all the conditions of the experiment. These demonstrate how we are motivated to reciprocate. And this is true even if we're not thinking about our behavior consciously.

Marketing professionals use this strategy regularly. They offer free training when you purchase the product. Or they offer a free chapter of their book when you visit their website. Their hope is that you'll in turn be motivated to continue to engage with them, deepening the relationship and the chances you'll buy more.

We value reciprocity from a young age as well, and this suggests it is embedded in our frameworks for how social relationships work. Researchers ¹² tested how many stickers children would share with others. A child was informed about whether another child wanted stickers and about whether the other child had demonstrated sharing behavior themselves. The first child was likely to share when the other child wanted stickers, but they were even more likely to share when the other child had demonstrated sharing behavior.

The children had a preference for reciprocity. When others shared, the first child was more likely to also share. In addition, the first children were also asked about emotion, and they acknowledged that when others received stickers, they were likely to feel good about it. This demonstrated that the first children were able to put themselves in the other child's situation and empathize with how they would react to receiving the stickers.

In addition to being related to the concept of reciprocity, this is related to *social exchange theory* in which we tend to trust others more when they give back. We, in turn, return favors, share, and invest in the interaction.

Another way to think about this dynamic is through *social penetration theory*. In this case, the theory explains how we build relationships through mutual sharing of thoughts, ideas, emotions, and vulnerabilities. People usually start a relationship superficially, sharing more surface-level information with someone else and withholding negative information. Next, they will start to share more and divulge information that is more private or intimate. After that, people will progress to more casual and spontaneous sharing with the other person, and from there, establish a routine of openly sharing on a regular basis.

Through all of these stages of sharing, we're looking for cues from others. If we start to share more details, we watch for the other person to demonstrate that they're listening and acting with empathy toward us. But we're also watching and listening for them to follow suit and offer their own stories, information, and intimacies to match what we're sharing.

Reciprocity happens through conversation and interaction, but also through actions. It's interaction-level sharing as well as initiative-level sharing that matters. We want great conversation partners and people who will be open with us. And we want relationships with people who will invite us over for dinner after we've invited them, in a reinforcing pattern that builds bonds and trust.

Reciprocity is also a factor in assessing the value of a relationship. *Communicate-bond-belong* is a social theory that suggests any social interaction requires some expenditure of energy. You must put effort into conversation, discussion, or exchange, and you'll continue to expend effort as long as your needs are met. But when you're not getting a return from the relationship, or you don't perceive responsiveness from the other person, you'll reduce the investment you make.

When you invite your friend to get together and they never initiate in return, you may decide the relationship isn't worth your one-sided effort. Or if you are sharing openly, but your friend holds back, you may reduce the amount of openness you're expressing in the relationship. Either of these may be an indication that the other person doesn't share the same goals for the relationship. Scaling back on your investments can be a healthy way to align with their desires for less interaction or intimacy.

We talked earlier about managing expectations and how lower expectations or a constructive absence of expectations can provide extra opportunities for surprise or delight. At the same time, great relationships are built on back and forth exchange and a shared value for the interaction, and this is demonstrated by investments of time and energy by both parties.

How to Have a Conversation

Having a conversation is a primary way that we establish patterns of reciprocity, and it is a powerful engine in building relationships. In fact, having even one conversation a day can contribute to mental health and well-being. ¹³

You've heard that someone can be great at the art of conversation, but there's also some science behind the nature of what's included in your discussions. When you speak about more in-depth topics, and when you're open with sensitive details, you'll tend to build the relationship. Self-disclosure can be disarming, because it demonstrates you trust someone, and it invites your friend into your experiences.

If you simply exchange small talk, you'll detract from the feeling of deeper connection. Rather than sending a message of trust in the person and value in the dialogues you're having, as with deeper conversations, it sends a message that you prefer to stay at the surface and avoid investment in the relationship. Small talk may be a way to start a conversation, and it certainly has a place with superficial exchanges with people like the checkout person or the barista, but you'll need to go deeper if you want to build the relationship.

Another element of effective conversation is catching up with someone. To sustain relationships, we need to know what's going on in people's lives. Knowing what they've done, what's new, and what's coming up are all helpful. When you know more, you can provide support or empathy or share their excitement or anticipation.

Understanding more about their life also gives you information about what's important to your friend, what they prioritize, and how they think. And these give you topics you can ask questions about in order to ensure continuity in the relationship. If they share that they are having trouble getting along with a coworker, you can ask later how that's going. Or if they open up about challenges with their child's performance in school, you can check in on that concern next time you chat.

Joking around is also a powerful way to build a relationship. We've talked about how a similar sense of humor is a pillar of friendship, but it may be especially significant. Why? It's partly a matter of brain chemistry, as laughing together releases feel-good neurological chemicals. ¹⁴ We feel positively when we're laughing with others, and this makes us want to repeat the behavior, spend more time with them, and continue the positive experiences.

In addition, when we have good-natured exchanges or banter with others, it's also likely to enhance bonding and help us feel closer to the person. ¹⁵ Laughing together is linked with greater satisfaction and intimacy in the relationship. It's also correlated with cognitive ability, and it's something that people prioritize in a long-term partner. And of course laughing is best for the relationship when you're laughing *with* others, not *at* them, and when it's constructive and respectful to the relationship you share together.

Conversations are also especially meaningful to relationships when we express gratitude during the discussion. You advance the relationship by talking about how you value someone or that you appreciate the point they made. And when you compliment someone, it can cause them to open up and continue sharing because you've communicated how you value them.

This doesn't mean you must always agree. You can appreciate where someone is coming from or how they express their ideas, even if your opinion isn't aligned with theirs. In fact, great conversations can include disagreement, for sure. Exchanging different opinions, learning from diverse experiences, and expanding your own points of view based on divergent world views can be tremendously helpful in building relationships.

In conversation, it's also beneficial to pay attention to the rhythm of the relationship and development of intimacy over time. If you share too much, too soon, it will feel awkward and potentially cause others to retreat. We value an even exchange where we peel back one layer at a time. Even in a relationship where you feel a click or feel you can go more deeply in the discussion right away, you'll want to base that assessment on the cues you're taking from the other person and ensure your desire to get more intimate is something they share.

Topics That Matter Most

We've talked about the importance of inquiry and how valuable it can be to ask questions in order to ensure you're not making assumptions or drawing the wrong conclusions about the motivations behind someone's behavior. And inquiry can be especially helpful to understand where people are coming from, what's going on for them, and what makes them tick.

But you can also think more specifically about the topics that will buttress the conversation and keep developing the relationship. Here are the subjects to prioritize.

Talk with your friend about the past and ask them to share events that happened before. Ask them about their favorite memory or most awkward moment. Ask about the lessons they've learned or ask them to talk about their childhood. Ask them about a high point and a low point from the last year. Ask them how their childhood interests are linked with their interests today. Ask them what they'd like to let go of or do differently. Ask them how they've changed as they've gotten older.

We're always growing and changing, so asking people to reflect on their past can give you a greater sense of who they are beyond just the person you see in the moment.

Talk with your friend about their accomplishments and what they're proud of. Ask them how they were able to achieve success and what sacrifices they had to make in the process. Ask them what motivated them to pursue their passions and ask them what advice they would give to others. Ask about a choice that had positive results or something they received positive feedback about. Ask them what they most like to be complimented on, or about a characteristic they most appreciate in themselves.

When you ask a friend to consider their success, it enhances your appreciation of them but also reminds them of their strengths and helps them feel validated.

Talk with your friend about their hopes and aspirations for the future. Ask them where they want to go and what they want to accomplish. Ask them to imagine what's down the road for them, and to talk about why that matters. Ask your friend about what they want for their family, their work, and their personal pursuits. Ask them what they want to learn and what adventures they see themselves taking. Ask them where they want to travel, what they want to do

differently, and how they want to stretch out of their comfort zones. Ask them what they want their legacy to be or what kind of charity they would start if they had unlimited time and money.

When you focus on the future, you build the relationship because you send a message that you plan to be there for their journey and that you care about them today and in the future as well. You value who they are and who they may continue to become. Being hopeful together can build your relationship.

Talk with your friend about their passions. Ask your friend what they're excited about, what they think is cool, and what they're curious about. Ask your friend what they would do tomorrow if they woke up with no constraints. Ask them what skill they've always wanted to learn or ask them about a small habit that helps them achieve success.

Getting a friend talking and sharing your own enthusiasm can bring joy to the relationship and provide the opportunity to learn about what interests your friend and where your interests may intersect. Like being hopeful together, being happy together can also stimulate your relationship.

Talk with your friend about how they think. Ask about a rule-of-thumb they follow, or what they are grateful for. Ask them what brings them joy or how they would define the ideal day. Ask your friend what advice they would give to someone else or what inspires them. Ask them what they know now and wish they'd known then.

It's constructive to learn how friends process information, work through issues, and make sense of the world. We've seen the research about how friends tend to demonstrate similar thought patterns. Likewise, understanding more of what they think and how they think can add to a full understanding of and appreciation for your friend.

Talk with your friend about their regrets, fears, or points of pain. Ask your friend about the worst advice they ever took or ask about something they would like to do over. Ask them about something they'd like to forgive themselves for or ask them about a habit that gets in their way of achieving their goals. Making room in a conversation for people to talk about what's not working or what's difficult is especially powerful in deepening a relationship.

Through these kinds of topics, you're giving your friend the option to share things that are more negative, and this can communicate that you care and want to offer compassion. Going through hard times together can be one of the experiences that bonds us most significantly.

Talk with your friend about relationships. Ask about what they most value in a friend or ask them something they have in common with their partners. Ask them what a friend does for them that makes them better, or ask them about the top five values their family shares. Ask them what they've learned lately from a colleague.

Talking about a friend, a partner, or a work colleague is a natural way to see ourselves through our ties with others. Gossip has come to have a negative connotation, but evolutionarily, gossip was a way to keep in touch with the social network and understand people's ties to each other.

Talk with your friend about bigger issues. Talk about your shared context, including what's going on in the world, the region, or your community.

When you talk about things outside of yourself, you extend the topics for your discussion, but you also reinforce the bond you have. Your relationship is meaningful within the context of everything else that is going on.

Talk with your friend about things that are light, superficial or less intense. Ask them what their favorite song is or what super power they would most like to have. Ask them what they would do if they could be invisible for a day, or ask them what they're superstitious about. Ask them the best gift they've ever given or received.

Every good conversation must ebb and flow. You'll start with a quick mention of the weather and then catch up on what's happening on a deeper level. You'll share a more significant problem they're facing and then you'll lighten things up with a reference to something you both find funny. The opportunity to talk about topics that are less serious provides for flexibility and comfort in how you interact.

Of course, there will also be things you don't want to talk about, and it's healthy to have appropriate boundaries. Talking openly doesn't mean you must be an open book. You'll choose what to share, how much to share, and when to share based on the trust that you build with your friend over time.

Healthy Silence

In the midst of talking about how friends relate, chat, discuss, and dialogue together, it's also important to consider the power of a friendship in which you can be quiet together. In our world of constant stimulation and cacophony, a good friendship is also characterized by the ability to be comfortable with silence.

And in general, the closer your relationship, the greater the possibility of being comfortable with silence. If you're making a long road trip with your friend, you can talk for the whole time, but it's also healthy to be alone together, each with your own thoughts and reflections, and then to jump back into conversation in a fluid, natural give and take.

Road trips and time in the car are perfect examples of when conversation can ebb and flow with silence. Marisol and I were traveling on business together and didn't know each other well. But when a snowstorm in Toronto canceled our flight, we were thrown into a long drive home together in a rental car.

We talked about our lives and shared the long versions of stories, because we had tons of time in the car. We also had periods where we were quiet, reflecting on our own thoughts. We found out details of each other's lives we never would have learned otherwise and also developed comfort together in the knowledge we could be silent.

We've built a friendship and have stayed in touch all these years, despite working in different departments and in spite of Marisol's retirement. The foundation we built on the car ride, both in dialogue and in silence, was a strong start to a long friendship.

The Activities of Friendship

Shared activities may seem like an obvious way to build a friendship, but there are a number of reasons that spending time doing things together is powerful glue for relationships.

Activities reinforce common interests, and this validates your connection. We talked about how we tend to choose friends based on shared hobbies, and we also talked about how we prefer homophily, in which we're attracted to people who are similar to ourselves. Engaging in shared activities reinforces this commonality.

You both love kayaking, so you spend time on the water, or you both enjoy geocaching, so you set out regularly on adventures. Trying new things can also be a way to build trust. Your friend enjoys classic rock or exotic foods, and you agree to attend the AC/DC concert or go to the new restaurant, expanding your horizons based on the recommendation and passions of your friend.

You may love certain hobbies when you do them on your own, but research ¹⁶ found that people reported the greatest amounts of joy when they engaged in shared activities. Sharing activities with a friend may also increase your accountability. In fact, if you exercise with a friend, you're 45% more likely to maintain your regimen and 65% to continue for a year or longer. ¹⁷

Activities are also meaningful because they provide a common language and source of experience. You share the hobby of birding and learn the names of birds, their migration patterns, and the new apps that help you identify their songs. And activities provide you with shared memories, which contribute to continuity in friendship. You can remember together the laughably terrible food truck fare you had, or the time your train was delayed, and the hotel had given away your rooms for the night.

A significant way to build a relationship is to get together beyond the place you met or normally see each other. If you see your friend at meditation class and ask her to have coffee afterward, you're increasing the commitment and investment of your time and sending a message you want to amplify the friendship. Or if you suggest that you and your work friend get together over the weekend with spouses, you've moved the relationship to the next level, by taking it from the work context to the social.

When you share more activities together, you also get to see your friend in different lights and additional situations. You always knew your colleague had a goofy sense of humor, but when you go shopping together over the weekend, you enjoy her whacky jokes even more. Or you're inspired by the friend in your professional women's group who is so calm and poised and then appreciate seeing a more casual side of her personality when you do a cooking class together.

Eating together is another activity that can be especially powerful. We know this intuitively, but a study ¹⁸ demonstrated significant outcomes. In fact, people feast together as part of events or ceremonies, but even a mundane meal together in the cafeteria at work or an ordinary dinner around the table at home can have significant benefits. Based on the research, when people ate together, they felt more engagement and connection with the community, and they tended to feel more trusting of those they had eaten with. In addition, they were also more likely to feel that life was worthwhile and to feel happy and satisfied with life.

And it wasn't just eating together that had an impact, it was also the frequency of the experience. When people ate in social groups more frequently, they had more friends and reported greater overall levels of happiness and engagement.

Eating together also extends the network. It's natural to invite others to join in. Eating together also creates the conditions for casual interaction in which people may be more likely to let their guards down and demonstrate more openness. And eating together drives sharing behaviors. You pass the salt and pepper across the table in the cafeteria, or you donate your extra napkin to the person who forgot to grab one.

Activities are also powerful because they give you an excuse to get together or gather with a group. You don't have to awkwardly ask for time to have a meaningful conversation. Instead, you can set a golf date and know you'll have time to talk while you play.

Activities can also facilitate the process of socializing for those who may be more introverted or less comfortable in social situations, which contributes to mental health. In a survey, ¹⁹ 33% of respondents said their mental health was suffering because they lacked a hobby or an interest outside of work. They suffered because they didn't have things to do, places to go, or people to see.

For those who struggle, activities provide both impetus and structure. Strolling together through the farmers' market creates a reason to get off of the couch and meet a friend, and it's a structured experience for the interaction as you chat between produce stands. The scrapbooking group provides the opportunity to share space, time, and pleasantries while you're creating.

Olivia's experience provides an example of the power of shared activities. She had taken her first job after graduating from college and was living in a new city. Unfortunately, the pandemic had just begun, and following just one week of showing up for orientation with her cohort of new hires, the world was shutting down. It wasn't the ideal time to integrate into a new community, a new role, or into new social groups.

Luckily though, the new hires had just enough time to participate in a trivia night together before everything closed. About 10 people showed up to play that first night, establishing their common interest in trivia. They barely knew each other after the first gathering, but the starting point was enough. They kept the group going, first meeting for trivia virtually, and eventually getting together in person. They formed a small pod of connection and safety in a sea of separation and social distancing.

The group members were all new college grads and just starting their careers. Their similar circumstance was a source of bonding, but so was their need for each other. They were going through a difficult and uncertain time together, which made

their connections even more necessary and even more meaningful.

The group hasn't stayed together. Some took other jobs, some got married, and some moved away. But their bond was exactly what they each needed at the time, and it nurtured the connection they all craved.

Volunteering

A particularly powerful shared activity to engage in with friends or to make new friends is volunteering. While it's helpful to others, it also plays to our desire to make a contribution to our community, and it contributes to our own well-being.

Volunteering is also linked with making more money. ²⁰ When people invested time volunteering, their salaries increased.

There are some good reasons for this. When you volunteer, you may be building technical skills, but you may also be building social skills as you take responsibility, work together on a team, interact with others, communicate your ideas, or navigate opposing opinions about how things should get done. Volunteering may also build confidence as you feel more empowered by expressing your talents and being a vital part of the community. All of these may play a part in success at work.

Volunteering was also linked with a greater likelihood of being employed in the first place and of having higher wages. ²¹ This is likely the case because of the network you build in the process of volunteering. You get to know people at different companies and in different parts of the community.

When you're working alongside people in a volunteer setting, it also reinforces your mutual concern for the cause as well as your efforts to make a difference. This can foster your credibility with others, which may in turn increase the chance they'll recommend you to a friend or someone else in their network. Volunteering also demonstrates initiative, reliability, and motivation. And all of these are attractive to employers.

One of the barriers to volunteering is a lack of time. We're busy with our work and family obligations. But if you volunteer with friends, you get multiple benefits. You're making a contribution, building your skills and your network, and spending time with your people.

Research ²² has also found that when you do things that are helpful to others and that energize you, you're likely to perceive that you have more time. Rather than leaving you sapped or drained, you feel good about what you've accomplished, and you literally feel less crunched. You feel time abundance rather than time scarcity.

And volunteering is an especially meaningful way to build relationships. You validate the common points of view you have with a friend on the importance of an issue, because you're volunteering for a cause that moves you both. And you're establishing a common language. You're building memories together and extending the amount of time you're investing in each other and in the community as well. You're also solidifying a network of connections. When you're volunteering with a friend, you meet the same people, and these intersecting ties enhance the network and your own well-being.

Of course, you can also do nothing with a friend, and this can build your relationship as well. Like the ability to be silent together, you can also have a healthy friendship in which you can just hang out. You can take your dogs for a walk together or just watch football on a Sunday afternoon. Quiet times are healthy ways to share experiences as well.

Key Points for Reflection

Here are important ideas to keep in mind from this chapter.

- Empathy is both cognitive and emotional and is correlated with better relationships and even big outcomes for business.
- Inquiry requires openness, and it's linked with listening to friends and learning from them as well.
- Demonstrating generosity tends to build relationships.
- Reciprocity is a human expectation, and it is necessary for a healthy relationship.
- Meaningful conversation with friends can help deepen relationships and a variety of topics can increase your understanding and appreciation of friends.
- Silence is also valuable in relationships.
- Investing time in activities with friends can create common ground, common language, and shared experiences to extend and expand friendships.

In order to think, act, and interact as a good friend, you'll need to find them in the first place. That's where we'll turn next as we explore where to find friends.

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Chapter 9

Where to Find Friends

“Who finds a faithful friend, finds a treasure.”

~Folk Saying

The Places You'll Go

So, friends are critical in a lonely world, and the dynamics of social interactions influence how we bond with friends. But where can you find friends in our busy, disconnected, distracted world?

There are many places where friendships can develop, and we've seen that 75% of people make their friends at work. But data shows ¹ that many people also say they make their friends in high school (87% of people) or in college (70%), through their neighborhood (61%), in a church or spiritual community (44%), through an informal channel like chatting in a park (38%), through their children's activities (38%), through sports or fitness activities (33%), through volunteer work (30%), or through an event like a concert or a movie (24%).

These stats refer back to our discussion on the power of gathering places that found that when people had places to gather, they were much more likely to have friends. When people meet at churches, when they strike up a conversation in the dog park, or when they get to know each other sitting in the auditorium at their children's violin concerts, they're benefitting from proximity and gathering together. They're also building relationships based on common experiences and memories.

Cody provides an example of building relationships based on places that catalyze shared experiences. As a college freshman, he had gone into his dorm assignment “blind,” meaning that he hadn't selected a roommate ahead of time or completed any compatibility assessments through the university. He and Vikram were fortunate to end up in the same dorm room together. They got along well, experiencing the click that we discussed earlier.

But Vikram and Cody also had the good fortune of living in a dorm that featured a courtyard area. On the day of Freshmen move in, Cody's parents took the two of them out for dinner at a local restaurant and then said a tearful goodbye. After the parents drove off on the late August night, Cody and Vikram rounded the corner of their dorm and walked into a common area where people were playing spike ball. They joined in, made friends, and they found their people.

In addition to becoming fast friends with each other, they also became fast friends with a community of others who were enjoying the game. It started with spike ball, but then grew to spending time together watching sports, playing intramural volleyball, and hanging out on the weekends. Their friendship was based on an early click, and then it was based on running into others in the courtyard, bonding over common interests, and investing time together.

In addition to friends who become closer based on spending time together, many people also have situational friends, in which their friendship is tied to the circumstances where they met and continue to interact. In fact, 69% of people have a friend they only see in certain places and at certain times. It's the friend they chat with at the gym or the acquaintance they see at Pilates every Tuesday night. Another half of people, 51%, say they have activity friends. These are people they get together with for regular activities but don't see otherwise. These are the friends you see at sip-and-paint nights, or the retiree you interact with packing sack suppers for kids at your volunteer organization, and that's all.

You're also likely to find friends based on similar life stages. When you're in the midst of raising young children, you'll meet other parents on the playground or at a playgroup. Or if you're an empty nester, you may run into others doing tai chi at the senior center. It's also natural to have more to talk about with those who are at a similar stage of life. You're pondering how to get your first job, and you talk with others who are also in the process of networking and polishing their resumes. Or you're seeking advice about the best kids' travel hockey leagues, and you exchange notes with parents who have children at similar ages.

You may also especially seek out new friends at key transition points in your life. When you move to a new city, you're naturally looking for connections. Or when you build a new house, you're seeking to plug into the neighborhood. If you're transitioning from part time work to full time work, you'll naturally look for more relationships with colleagues. You're expanding your network at this point, and you'll tend to find people who are going through similar transitions, because they're inherently seeking connections at these same points in their lives. Openness to new relationships is always beneficial, but especially when you're in a time of transition, you'll be seeking to expand your connections.

Some people (39%) also have friendships that are only virtual—those they interact with online and have never met in person. And at the other end of the spectrum are people who have known their friends seemingly forever, with 67% who say they have a childhood friend whom they've known since they were both very young. ²

While these situational or activity-based friendships may not be as deep, they can still be rewarding. As we've seen, even superficial friends can contribute to a sense of connectedness and well-being.

Building Connections at Work

Work is a special case and can be an especially important place to find friends, create relationships, and build belonging.

Unfortunately, many people are lonely at work. We've talked about the high number who don't feel connected to colleagues, but what are the symptoms of loneliness at work? You might feel alone, but there are other more nuanced ways

you can feel isolation.

For example, you may feel like you're not speaking the same language as your co-workers. You're not understanding their points, or your ideas aren't landing. Or you may not feel like putting in the effort to make the connection happen. You might also feel left out. Everyone in the meeting is talking about their weekend, and you aren't motivated to share your own stories.

Or you may feel invisible. A survey ³ demonstrated that in situations where people felt invisible, there was a cluster of negative effects. People were less satisfied with their own performance, less engaged, and less secure in their jobs. In addition, people were more likely to experience imposter syndrome, burnout, and loneliness. This is related to all the research we've talked about in which feeling seen, validated, and appreciated are correlated with mental health and well-being.

You might also feel like your work doesn't matter, or worse, like you don't matter. Having a sense of purpose in which we feel connected to a bigger picture and connected to colleagues who are counting on us is associated with greater mental health. If you don't feel like your work has meaning or significance, it can actually be a symptom of loneliness.

Loneliness at work can also feel like you're unappreciated or unrecognized. This is closely related to a sense of purpose. You want to feel like your work matters, but you also want to feel like someone is paying attention and grateful for what you produce. Unfortunately, 55% of people don't feel appreciated. ⁴

Recognition contributes to satisfaction and retention. Research ⁵ on 217,000 workers found that the uppermost aspect of satisfaction and retention was people feeling appreciated for their work. Other elements of the work experience had a bearing as well, but feeling appreciated was primary.

In addition, when people received recognition, they were 45% less likely to leave their employer. ⁶ When people feel appreciated, they are also three times more likely to say they are engaged, and they're more likely to say their job gives them a sense of purpose. In addition, they're less likely to experience loneliness, according to the data. ⁷ Loneliness can also be manifested in the experience of support. When you don't feel like you can ask for help or if you don't see opportunities to offer support to others, you may feel a greater sense of isolation and disconnection.

To get beyond loneliness, work is a great place to make friends, find community, and be with your people, for many reasons.

Work works because you tend to be more similar to people at work. This is the theory of homophily again, in which there is value in part of our community being diverse, but also the reality that we tend to befriend those who are more similar to us. As we talked about previously, people with similar personalities tend to cluster within professions.

Work is also a terrific place to make more diverse connections. As we've seen, people tend to prefer similarity in choosing their friends, but diversity in your network is also useful. And you may make more diverse friends at work. You're put on the unfamiliar team to solve a problem, or you're asked to be part of the new ERP implementation, and these projects link you with people you might not ordinarily interact with.

Work is also a great place to make friends because we get to know people over time, and there is continuity in the relationship. The average tenure in a job today is only about a year to a year and a half. But even with this short period within each job, there is still enough time to get to know people.

Another reason we make friends at work is because we see people through ebbs and flows. We run into our teammate on the day she is struggling with her boss as well as the day she is celebrating her child's graduation. We also get to experience people through both task-oriented and relationship-based activities. We roll up sleeves together with our colleagues and dig into the work. But then we also run into them in the mail room and learn about their weekend activities.

Work also offers a large number of hours that we can spend with teammates. We spend 10 minutes catching up in the elevator lobby, spend an hour in a meeting together, and then spend another eight hours together during the day-long company retreat. And while the research says that friendships won't form only based on compulsory interactions, we are certainly more likely to find people we want to interact with through the shared responsibilities of our work.

And finally, work offers structure for interaction. The *myth of mingling* is that when you're at a social event, you make new friends. But in reality, you're less likely to mingle with strangers. Both introverts and extroverts tend to chat with people they already know. On the other hand, when social opportunities also have some structure, people can be more likely to connect. You're in a meeting together and you chat as everyone is arriving. Or you see someone at the water cooler and catch up. You're placed into situations where you can talk, socialize, and extend relationships by happenstance. Like social activities with structure, work offers the reassurance of structure for those who may be less comfortable in social situations.

Interacting with colleagues through ups and downs and through both task-based and relationship-based interactions gives us a variety of contexts through which we can get familiar and comfortable with others. And as we mentioned, when you're more familiar with someone you tend to be more accepting of them. And when you know people better, you'll feel a positive sense of obligation to them and the work you're doing together.

As we've said, belonging doesn't just arise from being together. It is based on a shared sense of purpose and identity. Work is the perfect place to remind us of our membership in the organization and our shared goals. When you show up together, you're inherently sharing in the purpose of the organization through the work you're contributing. Meaning in your work is key, but it tends to be a more individual concept. Your job has meaning and you feel meaning in the responsibilities that you face. But purpose is often a more collective experience. You achieve a broader purpose together with others.

Work provides for shared experience and shared language, and these develop relationships.

A Matter of Degree

At the same time large majorities of people make friends at work, some people also prefer to avoid friendships at work. But work friendships aren't an all or nothing option. You might choose to have no close friends, or you might choose to have a few acquaintances. On the other hand, you could prefer to have people at work that you trust more deeply and invest in.

When you're considering making friends at work, you can give thought to whether you're able to maintain appropriate boundaries. It can be wonderful to confide in a friend about your struggles, as long as you trust her to keep your confidences. And likewise, seeing a friend over the weekend can be a fun way to spend time, as long as you're both comfortable with the closeness.

Another challenge with workplace friendships is in cases where they drive gossip or if others perceive favoritism. You don't want your relationship with your friend to be a point of contention with others because they feel left out or inequitably treated based on your intimacy.

According to research, people join an organization because of the overall culture. They're enthusiastic about the job they'll get to do and look forward to building their career there. The primary reason people stay with an organization is because of their friends, their team, and their relationships. And the main reason people leave an organization is their leader. They don't get along with them, don't feel appreciated by them, or just aren't inspired by them.

Having friends at work can be powerfully positive, but a cautionary tale is also valid to share. Many companies do annual surveys and include questions about whether people have best friends at work. One company took this approach too far, and in addition to asking people whether they had a best friend at work, they encouraged people to name and claim their one best friend. They did this with way too much fervor. It was a constant point of conversation in meetings, during breaks, and even at monthly town halls.

And while their intentions were good in seeking to create strong social bonds, they were inadvertently excluding people. Their mistake was to foster the idea that each person could only have one best friend. If Joe's best friend was Diego, Chang was left out entirely, and he may or may not have had his own best friend at work.

Like a bad version of choosing teams in middle school, the over-emphasis on a best friend at work created in-groups and out-groups as well as in-people and out-people. A better approach would have been for the company to encourage friendship and positive interactions and reinforce that people could be friends with multiple co-workers.

While this example overemphasized friendship, work can be a meaningful source of connection. After all, it is fundamentally social, even for jobs that require less collaboration. At work, someone is giving direction, setting expectations, providing input to your work, and receiving the outputs of your work. Even if you're a solopreneur, you're delivering value to customers. Others depend on our work, whether it's the next person in the process or the customer receiving the final product or service.

These dynamics make work a mutual effort, and they offer a sense of obligation and embeddedness in a social framework. Find your friends at work if you're inclined to, and invest in relationships as you wish, knowing that work can offer terrific opportunities for connections and community.

Finding Friends in a Digital World

As we've seen, the digital landscape has been a double-edged sword as it relates to relationships, connections, and community. On one hand, digital solutions have allowed us to communicate and get to know people throughout the world. But if digital takes over our relationships or replaces human connections, we experience loneliness and mental health issues.

Perhaps the most important way to deal with the digital is to ensure that it's serving you, rather than you being in service to it. You can do this by managing your time on social media and reducing the hours you spend on devices. Be intentional about ensuring that devices aren't separating you from other humans or getting in the way of meaningful relationships.

It's also a good idea to use devices with intention. For example, you put your phone away when you're having dinner with a friend, but when you get to a topic that you're both curious about or if you want to settle a disagreement about a factual issue, pulling out your device and getting information can add to the real-life experience.

Perhaps you get on the topic of wine and whether a certain type comes from Italy. You can look it up, and then get right back to your conversation. Or perhaps you disagree about which country has the highest levels of happiness. You can get the facts and then continue your dialogue with your friend.

The key is to keep use of devices to a minimum in the interaction. It can be tempting to pull out your phone and search for the photo of the sloth that you saw on vacation, but peeking at your screen will have much less meaning to your friend than hearing your lively description of the experience.

You can also use digital to stay in touch when you're busy. A group chat can be fun when you're not together with your friend group and allow you stay in touch by checking in or sharing memes.

A group of women were long-time friends, but they lived in five different states. They got together annually for long weekends, and their devices were mostly out of sight. But when they returned to their homes, they regularly texted to check on each other, offer jokes or encouragement, or commiserate about politics. The relationships were built most powerfully in person, but texting kept the friendship evergreen and reminded them that they're thinking about each other.

It's also valuable to be in person as much as you can. While it's great to meet virtually with friends who are far away, it's better to choose to be in person whenever you're physically able to do that. And when you are in person, be present, be attentive, be focused, and try not to be distracted by your phone.

A pithy sign outside a coffee shop said, “We don't have WIFI. Talk to each other. Pretend it's 1995.” What a concept.

It should go without saying, but you're also wise to connect with authenticity, using your own words and sentiments. A parent company of dating and matching apps has introduced AI on its platforms. AI will help people choose a profile picture and write their bio to optimize how they're judged by others on the sites. And then AI will also help them flirt. Depending on how much AI is writing or flirting, you can imagine a ridiculous situation where his AI is flirting with her AI and they finally get together face-to-face and have no idea who they're talking with, because the relationship was built without enough personal involvement.

On a related note, one study ⁸ found that more than 50% of LinkedIn posts are AI-generated. Based on an 82-month study, there was a 189% increase in AI-generated posts after the introduction of AI chatbots. Again, people are relating with each other in in-authentic ways.

Despite these examples of a lack of authenticity, there will be situations in which we can benefit from the influence of AI on our communication. A senior executive at a healthcare organization was sharing that he has had a historically bad relationship with his aging mother. They have just never gotten along or seen eye-to-eye. But lately, he has started using an AI chatbot in his communications with his mom. He writes an email as he would normally compose it and then enters it into the AI chatbot asking the system to “make it loving.” It's the AI-improved version that he now sends to his mom. He reports that their relationship has improved.

It's certainly a balance. We want to use tech to help relationships but also ensure that tech doesn't cause a degradation of relationships. A *parasocial relationship* is one in which someone has an imaginary friendship with someone else. When children have imaginary friends, it's benign, but parasocial relationships are also common with media personalities in which people can become consumed, imagining they have a close relationship with a celebrity without having ever interacted with the person directly.

Parasocial relationships are also increasing based on social media. People can feel unfounded intimacy based on likes, comments, or follows. These kinds of relationships are smart to avoid because there is an opportunity cost in terms of time. When you're online with someone, you may not be building a relationship that you can count on for emotional support, true connection, or the reduction of loneliness.

I recently led a workshop on how AI was changing our thinking, interactions, and our work. A senior executive spoke up and was enthusiastic to share how he was using AI as a thinking partner. While he was commuting, he would have in-depth conversations with AI asking questions, solving problems, and developing his ideas. He felt like he was getting substantive assistance from the chat bot. But he wasn't having the same conversations with his staff, and this was a problem. Others didn't have the opportunity to hear his thinking, learn from his processing, or develop their own skills based on his guidance or mentoring. He was also not having these dialogues with his spouse or his friends or building those relationships based on sharing ideas together.

It's a balance, certainly. He was increasing his efficiency and effectiveness, but he would also need to be careful that he wasn't sacrificing or replacing the investments with real people.

A new social media company is offering the opportunity to create a personalized community of bots. It has the same look and feel of other social media platforms but is all bots. You can set up your profile to prefer responses that are snarky and negative or encouraging and supportive and then interact online as if you're interacting with actual people. These kinds of innovations are potentially deleterious for our mental health as we engage with infinite scroll in solitude. In another example, MIT has experimented with a hugging vest. When users wear the vest, it gives them a squeeze meant to mimic a hug each time they get a like on social media.

As we've said previously, the danger of inauthentic relationships, parasocial relationships, or of digital replacing interactions in real life is that we risk losing a sense of community and connection. We want to identify with a group, feel aligned with a friend, share emotional connections, and look out for one another. AI can create, analyze, assess, summarize, and interact. But it can't care. We want belonging, not just matching.

Beyond getting together online or through digital platforms, you can also consider the highly unusual step of calling a friend on the phone. While it may seem outdated, research ⁹ found that hearing another person's voice can have especially positive outcomes. The study included an experiment in which people were asked to interact with others over text, email, video, or using just voice interactions. The results demonstrated that people established stronger bonds when there was a voice component to the interaction.

The takeaway message is that there is tremendous benefit in authentic, face-to-face relationships. There are certainly benefits to the interactions we have digitally, but intention is necessary, so we ensure that digital interactions are contributing to our mental health rather than detracting from it.

Key Points for Reflection

Here are important ideas to keep in mind from this chapter.

- Finding friends is significantly influenced by where you are and what activities you're engaged in, so you're wise to stay open in a variety of circumstances in which you might connect.
- There are many reasons why work is one of the primary places people make friends, and connections at work contribute to mental health and meaning. But people also have varying preferences for how close they want their friends at work to be.
- Finding friends in a digital world includes pros and cons. You can connect with a broader array of friends anywhere, but you'll want to be intentional about being focused and present, as well as face-to-face when you can.

Next, we'll talk about strategies to make friends and maintain them.

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Chapter 10

Making and Maintaining Friends

“There is nothing on this earth more to be prized than true friendship.”

~Thomas Aquinas

Challenges with Friendship

We've discussed the significant benefits that go along with connections, community, and friendship. But no friendship is perfect, and we will certainly encounter challenges with relationships. There will be high points and low points in friendship. You may feel especially close on your weekend away together hiking but then encounter difficulties when you don't see eye-to-eye on politics.

Giving a friend the benefit of the doubt is an investment in the relationship, and you'll want to balance this with protecting yourself and honoring your own needs as well. If you're having an unpleasant time with a friend, consider whether their behavior is a blip or a pattern. If they're acting in a way that is damaging to you or degrading the relationship on an ongoing basis, it may be necessary to provide feedback or get some distance from the friend. Hold your friend accountable for how they act but also offer grace since none of us is perfect.

There are some types of friends who may be wise to avoid. First, there is the hostile friend. This is the friend that behaves aggressively toward you. They may talk behind your back or sabotage you. They may compete with you, wanting to succeed while you fail. This is the friend who may act in a jealous way or betray your trust. This kind of friend could take credit for your ideas or take their teasing too far, making you the butt of jokes. All of this will feel wrong, because a true friend will want the best for you and will stand with you through trouble.

Another tricky situation with a friend is when they are aloof or when they don't reciprocate. We've talked about the importance of mutuality and exchange in a relationship. You suggest lattes, and then they invite you the next time. You send a text, and they respond. You confide in them, and they share a confidence as well. But a friend who isn't responsive, doesn't match your efforts, or doesn't pull their weight in the relationship can be especially disheartening. If they fail to initiate or fall short on commitments, it's possible they don't want the same things for the relationship that you do. In this case, you'll need to reset your own expectations. On the other hand, if they send strong signals they value you and the relationship, but just aren't pulling their weight, you may need to let them know how much it bothers you. Or you may need to consider distancing yourself, so you can invest in relationships that are more rewarding and two-way.

At the opposite side of the aloof friend is the friend who is overly demanding. In this case, they may want to dominate your calendar, always getting together, or they may dominate the conversation. This is a friend who may be self-centered or selfish wanting the spotlight on them and wanting your undivided attention. This kind of friend may fail to honor your boundaries or seek to control you. When people are high drama, it may be a strategy to keep the spotlight on themselves. In this kind of relationship, you may not feel like there is room for you and may not get your own needs met. You need a friend who will listen, reinforce you, and encourage you. But the overly demanding person may be incapable or unwilling to offer that kind of support.

You also want to avoid a friend who is a bad influence, or you may want to limit your interaction with them. We've seen how friends can impact each other and how there is significant spillover of behaviors in a relationship, from drug use and drinking to eating and exercise. If they are kind, you're more likely to be kind. If they never miss a day of their work out, you're also more likely to make a similar commitment. The influence can be better or worse. Because of the high level of influence friends have on each other, steer clear of friends who aren't making the choices that you want to make for yourself.

So how should you respond when you're in a more negative situation with a friend? First, get perspective. Step back, reflect, and consider how you've interacted over time. Avoid judging and give them the benefit of the doubt. Ensure that you haven't jumped to conclusions or made incorrect assumptions. Also assume good intentions and re-think your frustration.

After stepping back and reflecting, consider providing them with feedback, so they know how their behavior is affecting you. Let them know what's not working for you and how you'd like things to be different. Talking through things can strengthen your bond as friends, because it's an investment in the relationship. Your mutual desire to work through issues sends a positive message about your commitment to each other.

If you've had a conversation, provided feedback, and been clear about what you need, and your friend is still not acting as you wish, you may need to say goodbye. You can do this quietly, by just getting together less frequently, or you can let them know why you're separating. You'll choose which of these is best based on the nature of the relationship.

While conflict with a friend can be stressful, awkward, or uncomfortable, it really is a normal part of relationships. The key is how you manage it and work through it together. There are a few options for how you consider meeting your needs as well as their needs.

For example, sometimes conflicts are small, and you may choose to ignore or avoid the issue. Or if you have a bigger issue, you're wise to bring it to the forefront and talk about it. Acknowledge the issue, let your friend know you respect them and their opinion, and figure out the best solution. Additionally, depending on the issues, you may need to stand firm for what you believe and need your friend to stand down. On the other hand, there may be something that's critical to your friend,

making you willing to capitulate. Finally, you may be able to compromise, negotiating a solution that gets each of you part-way to your preferred outcome.

In whatever way you're working through conflict, whether you're standing firm, compromising, or acquiescing, do your best to interact constructively. Ask questions, let your friend share their point of view, listen, and then share where you're coming from as well. Be open to learning a new perspective and challenging your own thinking. In the midst of conflict, it can be especially hard to be sensitive or appreciative toward the other person, but this too will help you work through conflict constructively. Be empathetic and considerate of what they're going through.

Be patient and forgiving. This will be easiest to do if you have a longer history or a high balance in the patience bank for the relationship. When you've had a lot of positive experiences with someone, you have more to draw from when they are behaving in a way that depletes you or the relationship.

Maintaining Friendship Through Changes

In addition to working through conflict, it can also be natural to grow away from a friend. Your lives will change, and your friendships may change as well. As we've seen, relationships are significantly driven by proximity as well as being in similar life situations. It's natural to grow apart if you leave a job or if a friend gets married and you don't, or even if you have children and a friend doesn't. These differences in what you're doing, what you're facing, and what you prioritize will affect how much time you spend together and how you interact.

When your lives change, it can be harder to find things in common and share time together. You no longer see your friend in the hallway at work, or you may prefer to go on a bike ride but your friend is now spending time on the playground with his toddler.

If you want to maintain the relationship, how can you do that? Routine can be a great way to ensure you stay in touch, and the more regular your routines are, the better. Perhaps you used to see each other during your work team meetings, and now you have jobs at different companies. Establish a plan to take do a movie night together regularly. Or if you used to get together at your sailing club and now your friend has moved away, agree that you'll do a video chat or a call once a month.

You may also need to refresh your routines based on changes that you or your friend have gone through. Perhaps you don't get together by yourselves anymore, and now that you're married you include your spouses. Or you still go to karate class together, but you change to a club that has childcare for your friend's new baby. You may not be able to see each other as frequently, and it may not be as automatic to see each other, but you can put effort into connecting regularly.

You can also maintain a friendship by ensuring that you nurture what you have in common. When you worked together, you always had the topics of work, colleagues, or the latest organization restructure that you shared in common. But if your friend leaves the company, you'll want to find new topics that can help you continue your relationship. Ask questions about their new life and demonstrate interest and empathy even if they are on a different path.

In order to maintain friendship, it's also critical that you avoid competing or feeling threatened by their success. Perhaps you've been interviewing for a new job for months, but your friend gets a great promotion in the meantime. Or you've been wanting to start a business, and your friend starts her LLC ahead of your timeline. Be confident in who you are and where you are in your own life and try not to compare with your friend. You may be on different trajectories, but you can avoid judging theirs or your own. Remind yourself of all the things you appreciate about your friend that go beyond your life circumstances.

Ironically, you can also maintain a friendship when you allow for greater distance. It's natural that your friend may not be able to go out on the weekends now that she has a side hustle. If you insist on seeing each other in the same ways at the same frequency, despite changes in your lives, you'll be more likely to be disappointed. But if you can adjust how you connect, to accommodate changes you've gone through, you'll be more satisfied, and you can appreciate each other even more when you do see each other. Also be sure to allow space for your friend to make new contacts as well. She'll create relationships at her new company but remind yourself there is still room for your friendship even if you're no longer co-workers.

When life circumstances change, friendships do as well, and your old friend may create new relationships with people you don't know. You're wise to make new friends as well. If you're relying on one person to meet all your needs, you may put too much pressure on the relationship, especially in the face of life changes. Instead, branch out and create new bonds with people who can support you. Your friend will still be one of your people, but you can depend on others in your broader network.

Maintaining friendship may take more time, effort, and investment through life changes, but you can maintain a relationship by reminding yourself how much you care about your friend and making an intentional effort to stay connected.

Reconnecting with Friends

Another special circumstance of friendship is in reconnecting with old friends. And while rekindling a relationship offers tons of benefits, people tend to resist it.

In research ¹ on reconnecting, people were asked whether they wanted to reach out to an old friend and whether they thought the friend would appreciate it. Less than a third of the people in the study sent a message to an old friend. This was true even if they wanted to, even if they thought the friend would appreciate it, even when they had the contact information for the friend and, incredibly, even when they were provided with time to draft the actual note they would use to reach out.

The barrier for people seemed to be whether their old friend felt like a stranger. In fact, people were no more likely to reach out to an old friend than they were to reach out to a stranger.

Despite the obstacles, reaching out to an old friend has lots of benefits that can definitely be worth the effort. In particular, reaching out to an old friend can be validating. As we've seen, self-continuity is a feeling that our identity is consistent. It is a sense of coherence over time. Connecting with an old friend can remind us of who we were, what we valued, and even how far we've come. Perhaps we were shy in high school and a certain friend sat with us on the bus each day. Or we spent hours in orchestra with a teacher everyone loved, and the shared experience with a friend made it even better.

Reconnecting with an old friend can also be an efficient way to connect. Once you get over the initial hurdle of reaching out, you will likely have tons to talk about and plenty of memories to recount. You'll have a bond based on what you've been through, and you'll renew the friendship easily based on a common language and shared experiences.

There are a few key strategies to reconnecting with an old friend, and kindness and generosity are great places to start. You can tell yourself that you're getting in touch based on being empathetic toward your friend. As we've seen, large numbers of people are lonely and want more friends, so if you reach out, they are likely to appreciate and value your gesture.

Similarly, you're wise to be explicit about what you're seeking. Sometimes people get in touch out of the blue because they want something. They're looking for a job and they've exhausted their closer network, or they're desperately searching for financial help. These can be situations that feel one-sided. If someone hasn't been in touch and hasn't invested and is suddenly asking for something, we'll be less likely to want to respond. When you reach out to an old friend, be clear that you've been thinking about them and would love to reconnect, but you have no agenda (hidden or otherwise) and just genuinely want to check in and see how they're doing.

Another strategy to reconnect with an old friend is to keep it simple and low risk. Send a text or get in touch through a social media messaging platform. This may be easier than making a phone call that comes in at the wrong time or requires a lot of small talk. Reaching out through a messaging platform can give you a good opportunity to gauge their interest in reconnecting without a huge investment of time or effort.

When you're reconnecting, it's also wise to start small. After you've made contact and determined you're both interested in connecting, get together for ice cream or mini golf, rather than organizing a potluck with spouses. Less is more as you start small and continue to determine your mutual interest in making the friendship happen.

Building a Network

As we've seen, the value of your community isn't just about how many people are part of it, but also the quality of the relationships that you have. You'll need friends who energize you and inspire you, as well as friends who are reliable, and also forgiving.

In addition to these more general attributes, you can also consider the types of people who make up your social network, and whom you'll want to nurture as part of your group.

You want the friend who can be a cheerleader for your efforts. This is the person who builds you up, encourages you, and uplifts you. It's the friend who is authentically appreciative of your talents and who naturally emphasizes your strengths. We've seen that we're attracted to people who are positive and optimistic, and that there is a spillover effect from one person's mood to another. You'll want to spend time with people who are personally energized and who can contribute to your good mood. But this isn't the person who is toxic in their positivity, unrealistic, or tone deaf. Rather, it's the person who sees you for who you are and is supportive and encouraging.

One of the most successful ways to change behavior is through positive reinforcement, and this kind of friend demonstrates this approach. They hear your presentation and focus on the ways you were able to engage the audience and use humor, and they don't dwell on the moment where you forgot your next point. This is the friend who will compliment you when you accomplish the goal you had set and encourage you toward the next challenge you want to accomplish. This is also the friend who is able to celebrate with you and is never jealous or threatened by your success.

It's also especially meaningful to have a friend who is your advocate. This is the friend who will recognize if you're being treated unfairly and stand up for you. An advocate friend will say positive (authentic) things about you and they will support you and empower you to find your way out of a bad situation.

You also want a friend who will expand your horizons. We can get stuck in what we know and stay within our comfort zones. The friend who helps you try new things or think in new ways is especially valuable. Look for the person who wants to take a trip together or share the challenge of learning a foreign language. Seek out the friend who has different political preferences than you or who always seems to have a fresh point of view or a way of thinking that you hadn't ever pondered before. Spending time with friends trying new things can build bonds effectively because the experiences tend to be more memorable, and shared experiences drive happiness. ²

You'll also want to seek out a friend who is a critic. Like the friend who thinks differently, you also want a friend who can take a devil's advocate role. This is the friend who can be honest about what's not working, see the barriers you're facing, and provide constructive feedback. This is the friend who will tell you that you have spinach in your teeth. However, this isn't the friend who is negative all the time or who tears you down. Instead, they genuinely care about you, and they have your best interests at heart. They are motivated by positive intentions to help you improve. This is a friend who is also naturally focused on the future, because they know you can always do better, and they believe in your abilities.

You also want a friend who is a safe harbor when you really need comfort or reassurance. We all have hard times and points where we feel we've stumbled or failed. The safe harbor friend is especially caring and compassionate. This is the friend who will listen without judgment and avoid giving advice or trying to solve the problem. This is the friend who

understands that you just need to let down your hair, cry, rage, or express your worries and uncertainties. This friend sees you at your worst and still accepts you.

The best network of friends also includes someone who is your opposite. We've seen that having diverse friends is correlated with happiness and satisfaction. But beyond people who simply think differently, this is a friend who is truly opposite you on key dimensions. If you're introverted, it can be terrific to have the friend who is a pied piper and who is always arranging social outings and inviting everyone to the party. If you're analytical, organized, and always playful, it can be especially helpful to spend time with the friend who is a free spirit and always spontaneous.

In human development, it's valuable to become fully yourself and comfortable in your own skin. This sense of confidence and clarity in yourself can help you connect more effectively with others. You have a solid foundation on which you can build relationships. But as you mature, it's also beneficial to develop the parts of your personality that may feel less natural. A good friend who offers a foil to your own personality can help you do this.

Having a knew-you-when friend is also tremendously valuable. This may not necessarily be someone that you stay in close touch with, but it's the person who knew you when you were going through that hard time at work. Or that friend who was close to you as you were just starting your family and seeking to balance all the demands of work and life. It can also be the friend who shared a punishing time together with you and with whom you survived.

Early in her career, Keiko had a boss who was just terrible. Marco was unpredictable and erratic. Sometimes he would be super-friendly and other times he would ignore people. He had a short temper, and he would snap at the slightest frustration. In addition, he would bully others and cut them down. In addition, he was tasked with reorganizing the team, so he had license to hire, fire, promote, and demote team members. He had tons of control over where people's careers would go.

Marco's tenure was relatively short. He led the team for only a couple years. But during that period, many people left the company, and many struggled with anxiety and burnout. Liam reported to Marco at the same time that Keiko did, and Liam and Keiko share a bond decades later. They don't see each other often and don't talk about the experience with Marco very much, but when they see each other, they are quick to connect. They feel seen and appreciated by each other, and they get into meaningful conversations. They went through a terrible time and will always have the shared experience of struggle and survival based on trauma bonding.

This assortment of friends can certainly overlap. Your critic friend likely has a strong personality and may be your best advocate as well. Or your cheerleader friend may also be the person who offers you safe haven support. Overall though, as you're making choices about who you spend time with and as you're intentional about where you invest, these are the characteristics and the people who will provide tremendous value.

And reciprocity matters too. Just as you're looking for these attributes in others, you can provide these kinds of supports to others. Be an encouraging cheerleader or offer safe haven support when a friend is down and out. Be a friend who can provide honest, constructive criticism or a challenging point of view. Advocate for a friend. Encourage a friend to get out of their comfort zones as you try a new adventure together. And stay in touch with people, especially when you've survived a trying time together.

You don't have to be everything to everyone, but consider where you can offer the most meaningful kinds of support and how you can give back at the same time you're seeking friendship from others.

Starting a Friend Group

When you're looking for all the right kinds of friends, sometimes they can be tough to find. But you can empower yourself to create your own groups, clubs, and communities, and realize the benefits for well-being and reduced loneliness. Consider creating your own friend group.

Start with an impetus to gather. It will be challenging to get people together without an anchor, so you'll want to start with a common interest or activity that unites you. In reality, the reason you gather may not encompass your whole time together. Perhaps you're part of an investment club and you spend time exploring the stocks you'll invest in, but a good portion of your time is also spent catching up and chatting about unrelated topics. Having a reason to gather provides an excuse and a starting point for spending the time that builds bonds. Keep your group going by always having content for your next session ready to go, so you don't lose momentum.

Also consider a fun moniker for your group to boost your sense of identity and commitment. For example, you might gather for Sangria Sundays or you may get together for Bark and Brunch where you meet at a dog park with pooches and then go for brunch at a dog-friendly café. We talked earlier about the power of identity to provide a sense of community, and naming your group gives people something to remember as well as clarity about what they're walking into and why it matters. It helps build a shared culture for the group.

A challenge in getting friend groups together regularly is typically in the scheduling. As we've seen, time poverty is a limitation for many. But contrary to taking time, when we invest time with our people, we get a payback, because communities can leave us energized, validated, and optimistic. In addition, it's easiest to sustain a friend group when you have a regular schedule for getting together. You gather on the third Wednesday of the month to tend your neighborhood nature area, or you commit to your annual trip where you hang out, bond, and select your fantasy football teams.

One key to this strategy is to maintain the schedule despite people who may not be able to join for any particular meeting. If you only schedule when every person is available, you'll be doomed to fail, but if you have a group that is big enough, a critical mass will show up each time, and you can keep things going. Begin with a few hearty souls who are committed to the effort. Your crafting group may start with just a few of you, but once you have a core group and a rhythm, you can invite more people, add to the group, and extend the circle.

Another key to success is to keep the schedule as regular as possible, so people can plan ahead and make time for it. Also be clear with people about the commitment you expect. In your Bunko group, you may want to agree that you'll prioritize the group and do your best to plan around it. But for your picnic-in-the-park group, you may be content to just have people show up as they can with a loose, no-guilt commitment.

Consider the location you'll meet as well. If you're rotating between people's houses, it may be onerous to keep track of whose turn it is and people may have varying degrees of comfort with entertaining. But if you meet somewhere public like a restaurant, a park, or a coffee shop, you're likely to benefit from having a predictable low-maintenance place to count on.

Simplicity is also a factor for success in your friend group. In addition to meeting on a regular schedule in the same place each time, also consider how the process for the group can run with ease. For example, rather than having a new set of discussion questions for every book your group reads, use the same set for all your books. Or every January, select a list of topics you want to discuss with your business leaders' group, and then just work through the list each month.

Meena is a wonderful example of creating a community to nourish herself and others. She had been struggling with finding fulfillment in her work and life as she navigated the demands of her job and her busy young family. She also wanted to grow her confidence so she could in turn advance in her career. In addition, she wanted to expand her support systems beyond her family and her work colleagues.

She hit upon an idea that provided for all of these needs and challenges: She hired a life coach. But in a cool twist, she engaged the coach not just for herself, but for a group of women. Meena was able to get the commitment of about eight professional women acquaintances to share the price of the life coach who would meet with them once a week for 12 weeks.

The approach worked brilliantly, and each of the women appreciated the trust they built as a group and the support they received from each other. But key to success was also the shared commitment to show up and be present for each other. They set aside other responsibilities to ensure they could attend each week. The approach also worked for the life coach who was able to contract with a couple of the women for extra consulting and who was referred by a few of the women to other clients.

The group has finished, and the women still meet, now at a monthly cadence, because they all enjoy each other and find value in the community they built. And their life coach joins them once a quarter as well.

Meena's coaching group is a terrific example of starting with a personal need and recognizing that it could be parlayed to benefits for a larger group.

Also consider setting ground rules. Some groups don't need them and for some they may feel heavy-handed or awkward. But if you're starting a group where you intend to share a bit more deeply or provide feedback or coaching to each other, you may want to establish guardrails.

Andres participates regularly in a club for small and medium-sized business leaders. They gather to give each other advice and provide input to each other on the challenges they face with their companies. They have a ground rule of strict confidentiality. They don't want concerns about their businesses to leak out and they want to be sure that if they're testing ideas for a new investment or new innovation, the people in the group won't interfere with their exploration of that new avenue.

They also have a strict rule against selling to each other. While some of them have business relationships outside of the group, they set boundaries that allow the group to be a no-selling zone where they can share vulnerabilities and open up in a trusting environment.

Keep your group going with clear expectations and a committed core group. Ensure things are as predictable and easy as possible, allowing for changes or adjustments as necessary.

When you're creating a friend group, you can also consider the chemistry between people. While it can work to bring together eclectic people with various styles, sometimes it can be even better to curate the group a bit. For example, you love the members of your rock climbing group, but you know your especially aggressive and outspoken friend Aki probably won't mix well with them. Or you may appreciate and fit in with a variety of friend groups whose members wouldn't necessarily mix well with each other, and this is okay. Push yourself to be inclusive and bring in diverse group members but also know it's okay to consider how people will get along to ensure the energy of the group can be maintained.

Friend groups also work well when members have bonds outside of the group. If you meet someone in your wood-working group that you really click with, get together with them separately. Strong ties across and between members strengthen the group.

Successful friend groups must also have some leadership. Someone needs to make the reservation at the restaurant each month and confirm the next meeting time. The leader doesn't have to be authoritarian or dictatorial, and the tasks associated with leadership are often mundane. But having someone look after logistics can make or break the group. In addition, the leadership for the group can be shared or it can rotate, but someone needs to take responsibility for the group's continued life and logistics.

Making Friends with Yourself

With all this talk about friends, friend groups, and connecting with others, it can be easy to forget that making friends with yourself is also a terrific strategy for mental health. We talked earlier about making space for time alone, but the topic is worth a second look.

Make friends with yourself, starting with validating yourself. Some people don't want to spend time alone because they don't like themselves very much or don't appreciate their own company, but you can enhance your experiences of solitude by reminding yourself of your positive attributes. You're not perfect, and no one is. But just as you're a loving friend to others, you can be a great friend to yourself. Perhaps you're a great writer or you're caring toward animals. You may be

brilliant at finding new information, or you're full of ideas for how the world could be better. Whatever your strengths, revel in them and reinforce your own value for yourself.

Also enjoy yourself more by filling your time with meaningful activities. Binging on a favorite show may while away the hours, but it may also feel meaningless and sap your spirit. When you fill your time with things that pay you back, you'll contribute to your well-being. In fact, leisure activities can be good for you, ³ and they are correlated with greater well-being.

You can engage in creative activities like crafting, cooking, or artistic pursuits. Research ⁴ found spending time on creative activities contributed to well-being. And when people spent time doing art, they increased their self-confidence. ⁵

You can also get outside. When you do, you're likely to feel happier and have a greater sense of health and vibrancy. A broad research effort ⁶ examined 301 studies that had been conducted across 62 countries and found that nature has an especially positive impact. Being in nature, whether by walking, sitting, exercising, or even opening a window, resulted in a variety of benefits from better quality of thinking and cognition to more creativity and better performance at work.

Time in nature was also correlated with more reflection and a sense of renewal as well as increased access to intuition and greater motivation to take action. Nature had positive outcomes when people experienced it alone, but also when they were with others, because they felt greater cohesiveness and improved communication with others.

Spending time in nature also affects your perception of time. We talked earlier about how significantly people experience time scarcity and how disempowering hustle culture can be. In addition, we experience time in relative terms. If you're standing in line at the pharmacy, it can take forever, while vacations seem to fly by. People can also get stuck in the past, reminiscing so much that they miss the present. Or they can be overly focused on goals, achievements, and urgency to get to what's next.

But research ⁷ found that when people spend time in nature, they tend to reset their perception of time, and they tend to report a more balanced view of time in which they can focus more accurately on time's passage as well as more equally on past, present, and future. These contribute not only to greater well-being, but to the sense that there is enough time for all the things.

Another way to spend meaningful time with yourself is through exercise, which is also highly correlated with happiness and well-being. One study ⁸ found that the more people exercise, the happier they felt. And people didn't need to exercise for long. The link between exercise and happiness was evident even with small bouts of exercise.

Exercise was correlated with well-being for a variety of ages as well. Middle schoolers ⁹ experienced the positive effects of exercise. And exercise also contributed to increases in cognition, memory, and motivation for seniors. ¹⁰ Running, in particular, had positive effects on cognition and mood. ¹¹ And another study ¹² surveyed more than 11,000 people in 15 countries and found a link between exercise and improved optimism and happiness.

Learning is also a valuable solitary pursuit in its payoff for your happiness and well-being. Ancient philosophers recommended leisure activities, but they didn't intend people to lie around all day eating grapes. In fact, their definition of leisure included unpaid time working for the community (think: volunteer work) or time learning and improving oneself. Current wisdom also proves the value of learning.

In one study, ¹³ when people took part in classes, they were more likely to report better physical and mental health as well as greater levels of satisfaction with their lives. In addition, research ¹⁴ found that when people were part of a formal education experience, they reported higher levels of satisfaction with life and greater happiness.

People who engage in formal learning are also more rational and make better decisions. ¹⁵ In addition, people who participated in a formal learning program boosted both their likability and their agreeableness. ¹⁶ This has a payoff for individuals, but also for social relationships, as we seek to connect, communicate, empathize, and bond with others when we're not spending time by ourselves.

Spending time on your own in all kinds of pursuits contributes to your happiness. While connections and community are good for your well-being and happiness, extroversion is not a requirement. You can get terrific benefits from cultivating your friendship with yourself.

Key Points for Reflection

Here are important ideas to keep in mind from this chapter.

- No friendship is perfect, and all relationships are likely to face challenges and conflict.
- It's possible to maintain friends through life's changes with intentionality and planning.
- There are tremendous benefits to reconnecting with old friends, even if you've lost touch.
- In your network of friends, there are key personas you'll want to have represented and who can offer you the best support.
- If you want more friends, starting a friend group can be a rewarding solution, and there are straightforward strategies to do so.
- In addition to all your friends in your network, you'll also want to start by making friends with yourself.

Next, we'll wrap up our discussion of connections and talk about how we embrace community going forward.

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Chapter 11

Embracing Connections and Community

“The only way out is through.”

~Robert Frost

Envisioning a Connected Future

We arrive in the world alone, and we depart alone as well. But in between, we have our people. We could say that *in spite of* the big problems we face, from depression and anxiety to loneliness and disconnection, we can find community and connection. But we can better say that *because of* the issues we face, we will find our people and nurture our relationships. As we've explored, hard times are one of the most significant contributors to bonding, so we can stay optimistic about the possibilities for connection and community.

In addition, when things are upside down, inside out, or especially difficult, these challenges can be the impetus to reinvent, reimagine, and do things differently. Research ¹ found that when people felt helpless to do something about an issue, they had more negative reactions. But when they believed they could take action, they were less angry or disempowered, and they had more positive emotions.

Envisioning is also a powerful way to bring the future into focus, whether it's future you or future circumstances. If you've been around children, you know that a favorite activity in schools is to have the children write a letter to their future selves. It has the benefit of focusing them on their aspirations and creating an artifact to open, read, and reflect on years later. The reminder of how far they've come can be motivational. And there's an app that can help with this for adults. It allows users to write letters to their future selves in order to capture the benefits of a future focus.

In addition, we can consider the positive tension we create when we clearly envision what is to come and anticipate the future. Early in my career, I led workshops in which we would give groups the tools to think *backward from perfect*. We called the sessions “Future Pull Workshops,” and the idea was to imagine what things would be like 5 or 10 or 20 years out, and to be as specific as possible in that potential state.

The clarity of the vision would create healthy dynamic tension between what could be and what was and therefore motivate action. With the positive tension, we would think in reverse (from the future to now) about what would need to be true today, and what action we would need to take in order to make that future real. The more specific groups were about what they wanted, the more successful they were in taking action in the present to get where they wanted to go.

This envisioning can help with friendship, connections, and community as well. Thinking into the future, what will it be like when you feel rooted to a community and when you feel happy and fulfilled with the people around you? And what small steps can you take today, to move toward that ideal?

Building Resilience and Developing Perseverance

Today's challenges also require resilience, and resilience is made up of three elements. First, you are aware of what's going on and in touch with reality. Second, you're able to make sense of things, including what the circumstances mean to you in terms of how big the issue is and what its implications are. And third, resilience is when you take action to respond. Resilience is a muscle you build. The more you behave with resilience, the more resilient you become.

With resilience you'll also need measures of perseverance, dedication, determination, and persistence. Perseverance is both a means to an end as well as end by itself. It's a means to an end because it helps you get to the outcome you want. But it's also beneficial for its own sake. Acting with perseverance reduces depression, anxiety, panic, and mental disorders, according to a study over 18 years with more than 3,000 people. ²

You can persevere by being real about the challenges you face and being realistic about problems. In addition, a key feature of perseverance is the ability to reframe. Struggles are part of life and if you think everything will be easy, you'll set yourself up to fail. But if you tell yourself that there will be ups and downs, and ebbs and flows, you'll empower yourself to work through things.

In fact, research finds that the harder you work to accomplish results, the better you'll feel in the end. This is known as the *IKEA effect*, ³ based on how tricky it can be to assemble a piece of IKEA furniture and the huge sense of achievement you feel when you succeed in putting it together.

You can also persevere by learning from failure. When things don't go as well as you planned, you can regroup and reset. Research ⁴ found that when people examined their failures, they were more successful in the future. And you may not want 100% success anyway. Further studies ⁵ found that when you fail 15% of the time, it's the sweet spot to keep you coming back. There is enough challenge to keep you motivated to succeed, without so much failure that you become overwhelmed and give up.

Perseverance is also related to tenacity, and additional research ⁶ found that focusing on positive outcomes and keeping eyes on the future contributed to greater ability to stick with things despite difficulties and over a longer timeframe.

Thriving Together

How we think about the future, how we hope, and how we take action to improve it all matter. There's a story, often attributed to Cherokee teachings, that provides a memorable image. A grandfather is speaking to his grandson and explains that he has a struggle going on within himself between two wolves. One wolf is pessimistic, worried, stressed, resentful, arrogant, angry, and negative. The other wolf is optimistic, joyful, peaceful, hopeful, humble, trusting, kind, and serene. The grandson considers the story and asks his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?" The grandfather answers, "The one you feed."

For us, there is a lot to be concerned about, and it's legitimate to pause and feel the pain that arises from our disconnection and separation from our people. But we can also look around for hopeful signals toward strong communities that offer a sense of belonging, feeding the wolf of optimism.

One hopeful example is evident in the Verzasca Valley of Switzerland. My friend Taylor traveled there with her husband and their six-year-old daughter. The Boccia Al Bosco trail was a highlight of their trip. It is not just any hike. It features chutes, pulleys, and catapults that run alongside the paths. At the start of the trail, you obtain a wooden boccia ball and then as you're hiking, you roll the ball down the troughs that line the trails. Along the way, you can adjust the ramps yourself or collaborate with other hikers to redesign the runs and create your own pathways for the boccia ball.

The five and a half kilometers (about three and a half miles) are quite a trek for the typical child, but Taylor's daughter was enchanted and energized. They all were. The trail is a powerful example of a community that has invested in active experiences that connect people and engage them. It's a place to share, interact, spend time, and learn together not only about processes, systems, and mechanics, but also about each other.

But you don't have to travel to Switzerland or find engineered experiences. You can create belonging for yourself and others with intention and investments of time and attention. You can thrive by focusing on your own thinking, reaching out to others, and showing up in ways that reinforce relationships.

The key will be choosing what's right for you. You'll want to avoid taking on too many tactics at once. Instead, commit to executing on one action or just a few, and then incorporate additional actions with intention.

Perhaps you'll make an effort to manage your expectations, or you'll take more initiative to get together with friends. Start there and after you've mastered those new behaviors, move on to others. While there aren't quick fixes or simplistic formulas for relationships, there is a tremendous variety of ways to improve them and create fulfilling connections.

We understand thriving based on research that arises primarily from child development and elite athletics. Thriving always includes two components. There is a present component (think: finishing the sprint with your personal best time), and there is a future component (think: challenging yourself to break your own speed record).

Thriving together is like this too. We can appreciate the relationships we have and sustain and nurture them today. And we can put energy into continually expanding and deepening our connections for tomorrow. Many of our strategies will be life-long pursuits. When young children start school, many are told to "hold hands and stick together" anytime they leave the classroom for assemblies or field trips. This seems like excellent advice as we go out into the world. Connections are critical and presence together is powerful in counteracting loneliness, depression, and anxiety.

We can come together, and it's possible to create the conditions for fulfillment, happiness, and well-being in work and life. With this in mind, we can reinvigorate friendship, reinforce belonging, and reimagine our communities for the best outcomes.

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Acknowledgments

Thanks to my family. I love you immeasurably and appreciate your support, encouragement, ideas, wisdom, coaching, and humor. You are my joy and my community.

Many thanks to my agent, John Willig, who is the best in the business. Your guidance, expertise, experience, grace, and optimism are always inspiring and encouraging. Big thanks to the whole team at Wiley including Don Kolniak and Shannon Vargo who first reached out to me; and Zachary Schisgal, Amanda Pyne, Michelle Hacker, Deborah Williams, and Kelly Talbot. I am so grateful for your professionalism and process, as well as all your personal support to bring this effort to life.

A book is always a collective effort, and I'm grateful for all the colleagues I speak with week after week who challenge me, share new ideas, and help me think about my thinking. Exploring ideas, testing thoughts, and learning together are energizing and fulfilling.

And to the leaders, teammates, mentors, and friends with whom I've worked, thank you for encouraging me, cheering me on, and letting me know when I could do better. Thanks to the people who have allowed me to use their stories. And thanks to Rich Isphording, and Bob Baird for your empowering leadership.

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Tracy's opinions are her own and do not represent the organizations she is associated with.



Index

- absence of expectations, [99](#)–100
- accountability, [69](#)–70, [71](#), [135](#), [155](#)
- activity-based friendship, [142](#)–143
- adaptability, [59](#)–60
- advocate friends, [163](#)–164, [166](#)
- affinity bias, [83](#)–84
- age
 - and friendship, [7](#)
 - and loneliness, [4](#), [5](#)
- agency, [95](#)–96
- agreeableness, [81](#)
- AI. *See* [artificial intelligence](#)
- aloof friendship, [156](#)
- anxiety, [ix](#), [11](#), [73](#)
 - and change, [29](#)–30
 - and disconnection, [12](#), [13](#), [15](#)
 - social, [23](#), [27](#), [46](#)
- artificial intelligence (AI), [151](#), [152](#), [153](#)
- association bias, [86](#)
- associative thought, [40](#)
- attention, [110](#), [119](#)
 - and anger, [28](#)
 - to details, [121](#), [124](#)
 - impact of social media on, [24](#)–25
- attentional bias, [28](#)–29
- authenticity, [105](#), [151](#), [153](#), [163](#)
- availability heuristic, [85](#)

- bad influence, friends of, [157](#)
- bad news in social media, [28](#)–29
- bandwagon effect, [65](#)
- beginner's mind, [99](#)–100
- behavioral sink, [53](#)
- belonging, sense of, [ix](#), [9](#)–10, [17](#), [43](#), [49](#), [60](#), [61](#), [72](#), [78](#), [79](#), [109](#), [147](#), [177](#), [178](#)
- big five personality traits, [81](#)
- Boccia Al Bosco trail (Verzasca Valley, Switzerland), [177](#)–178
- body doubling, in social media, [12](#)
- body language, [37](#), [121](#)
- bonding social capital, [63](#)–64

brain, [ix](#) , [12](#) , [67](#) , [78](#) , [79](#) . *See also* [cognitive bias](#)
 and craving for relationships, [9](#) –10
 and decision making for others, [44](#) –45
 and mirroring, [115](#) –116
 and social interactions, [10](#) , [44](#)
 and social validation, [26](#) , [27](#)
 bridging social capital, [52](#) , [64](#)

 career
 advancement, impact of distance on, [15](#)
 satisfaction, and generosity, [122](#)
 trajectory, and friendship, [80](#) –81
 Chaos (Greek mythology), [33](#)
 cheerleader friends, [163](#) , [166](#)
 civility, [31](#)
 click factor, [86](#) –87, [142](#)
 cognitive bias, [28](#) –29, [83](#) –87
 cognitive empathy, [115](#)
 cohesion
 neighborhood, [82](#)
 and performance, [48](#)
 collaboration, [x](#) –xi, [17](#) , [51](#) –52
 collective effervescence, [65](#) –66
 collective illusion, [23](#)
 collective restoration, [36](#)
 collectivist societies, and friendship, [8](#)
 college students, loneliness among, [4](#)
 common enemy phenomenon, [77](#) –78
 communicate-bond-belong theory, [127](#)
 communication, [60](#)
 face-to-face, [37](#) , [47](#) , [153](#)
 nonverbal, [37](#)
 skills, [17](#)
 social media, [23](#) , [24](#)
 transparency in, [105](#)
 concentrated vacationing, [36](#)
 conflicts with friends, handling, [157](#) –158
 conscientiousness, [81](#)
 consistency in relationships, [89](#) , [105](#) –107
 continuity in relationships, [69](#) , [109](#) , [128](#) , [135](#) , [146](#)
 contributive justice, [60](#)
 conversations
 with friends, [127](#) –130, [134](#)
 and reciprocity, [127](#)
 small talk, [17](#) , [18](#) , [22](#) , [128](#) , [162](#)
 topics, [130](#) –133
 cooperation, [85](#) , [116](#)
 COVID-19 pandemic, [3](#) , [11](#) , [12](#) , [34](#) , [71](#) , [110](#)
 creative activities, [171](#)

critic friends, [164](#) , [166](#)

cult of busyness. See [hustle culture](#)

decision making

and formal learning, [173](#)

and humility, [104](#)

for others, [44](#) –45

density, and social behaviors, [53](#) –54

depression, [ix](#) , [9](#) , [11](#) , [13](#) , [23](#) , [46](#) , [47](#) , [109](#)

details, attention to, [121](#) , [124](#)

digital devices, intentional use of, [150](#)

dimensionality, [74](#) –75

dinner with friends, [136](#)

disagreement, [31](#) , [129](#)

disconnection, [23](#) , [110](#)

and fear, [30](#) –31

and loneliness, [12](#) –13

and mental health, [9](#) –14, [15](#)

and screen time, [37](#)

and social media, [28](#)

at work, [15](#)

discontinuity, [12](#) , [30](#)

distributive justice, [60](#)

dopamine, [26](#) , [27](#)

effort-impact assessment, [94](#)

emergence (group influence), [66](#)

emotional intelligence, [97](#)

emotional quotient (EQ), [18](#)

emotions, [13](#)

emotional contagion, [65](#)

emotional empathy, [115](#)

expressing and recognizing, [18](#)

regulation of, [112](#)

empathy, [ix](#) , [13](#) –14, [44](#) –45, [111](#) , [113](#) , [115](#) –118, [125](#) , [126](#) , [158](#) , [159](#) , [162](#)

employees

appreciation of, [145](#)

connectedness between, [49](#)

ostracism of, [10](#)

EQ. See [emotional quotient](#)

exercise, [172](#) –173

exhaustion, and screen time, [37](#) –38

expectations, and friendship, [98](#) –101, [127](#) , [156](#)

experience, and expectations, [98](#) –99

exposure effect, [29](#) , [84](#)

extroversion, [81](#)

face-to-face communication, [37](#) , [47](#) , [153](#)

failures, learning from, [177](#)
 fairness, [60](#) , [106](#)
 familiarity bias, [84](#)
 fear, [30](#) –31
 Five Square activity, [x](#) –xi
 FOMO (fear of missing out), [27](#)
 friction, elimination of, [22](#)
 friend groups, [166](#) –171
 chemistry between members, [170](#)
 common interest, [167](#)
 ground rules for, [169](#) –170
 leadership, [170](#) –171
 meeting location, [168](#)
 naming, [167](#)
 scheduling, [167](#) –168
 friendship, [ix](#) , [x](#) , [xiv](#) , [43](#) , [97](#)
 acting as a good friend, [103](#) –114
 challenges with, [155](#) –158
 choosing friends based on similarities, [80](#) –82, [145](#)
 culling and being selective about friends, [110](#)
 current state of, [6](#) –9
 and expectations, [98](#) –101, [127](#) , [156](#)
 finding friends, [141](#) –154
 and gathering spaces, [47](#) –48, [141](#) –142
 and health/happiness, [45](#) –46
 and identity, [74](#)
 interactions with friends, [115](#) –140
 maintaining through changes, [158](#) –161
 making friends with yourself, [171](#) –173
 network building, [163](#) –166
 number of friends, [79](#)
 online, [25](#) –26
 quality of, [46](#) , [163](#)
 reconnecting with old friends, [161](#) –162
 and self-continuity, [72](#) –73, [161](#)
 similarities in thinking between friends, [67](#)
 situational, [142](#) –143
 starting friend groups, [166](#) –171
 taking initiative in forming, [103](#) –104
 thinking as a good friend, [93](#) –102
 at work, [14](#) –15, [48](#) –50, [145](#) –149
 future, envisioning of, [175](#) –176

 gathering spaces, and friendship, [47](#) –48, [141](#) –142
 Gen Z, [16](#) –17
 gender, and friendship, [7](#) –8
 gene for gratitude, [111](#) –112
 generosity, [121](#) –124, [162](#)
 gossip, [132](#) –133, [148](#)

gratification horizon, impact of social media on, [25](#)
gratitude, [111](#) –112, [124](#) , [129](#)
group membership
 and identity, [76](#) –79
 and similarities, [81](#) –82
growth, [49](#) , [59](#) –60

halo effect, [83](#)
happiness, [34](#) , [49](#) , [82](#) , [87](#) , [136](#)
 and exercise, [172](#) , [173](#)
 and friendship, [45](#) –46, [164](#) , [165](#)
 and generosity, [123](#)
 and gratitude, [111](#) , [124](#)
 and religion, [78](#)
 and sense of purpose, [74](#)
 and social networks, [66](#) –67
heterophily, [82](#)
hobbies, [134](#) –135
homophily, [82](#) , [134](#) , [145](#)
hope, [112](#) –114, [131](#)
hostile friends, [155](#) –156
humility, [104](#)
humor, sense of, [128](#) –129, [136](#)
hustle culture, [38](#) –40
hybrid work, [34](#) , [35](#)

identity, [72](#) –79, [147](#) , [161](#)
 identity threat, [31](#) –32
 and roles, [74](#) –76
IKEA effect, [177](#)
income level, and loneliness, [6](#)
individualistic societies, and friendship, [8](#)
information
 and attention, [25](#)
 flow, in communities, [60](#)
 negative, [28](#) –29
 overload, [32](#)
 social media, [26](#)
innovation, [51](#) , [60](#) , [116](#)
inquiry, [118](#) –119, [130](#)
intellectual humility, [104](#)
intentionality bias, [84](#) –85
invisibility, feeling of, [144](#)

Johari window, [97](#) –98
justice, [60](#)

King, Martin Luther, Jr., [33](#)

knew-you-when friends, [166](#)
 knowledge spillover, [50](#) , [51](#)

ladder of inference, [118](#) –119
 leadership
 community, [60](#) –61
 consistency of leaders, [105](#)
 empathetic leaders, [116](#) –117
 of friend groups, [170](#) –171
 and trust, [88](#)

learning, [49](#) , [59](#) –60, [99](#) , [173](#) , [177](#)
 legibility in relationships, [105](#)
 leisure activities, [171](#) –173
 life stage, and finding friends, [143](#)
 likeability (bias), [85](#)
 linguistic determinism, [96](#) –97
 listening, [88](#) , [119](#) –121
 loneliness, [ix](#) , [3](#) –6, [30](#) –31, [32](#) , [95](#)
 and brain patterns, [10](#)
 and empathy, [14](#)
 factors affecting, [13](#)
 and friendship, [6](#) , [8](#) , [9](#)
 and mental health, [3](#) , [4](#) , [10](#) –11, [13](#) , [109](#)
 and physical health, [4](#) –5, [14](#)
 and screen time, [37](#)
 and sense of purpose, [34](#)
 and social disconnection, [12](#) –13
 and social media, [23](#) –24, [27](#) , [28](#)
 and social skills, [17](#) –18
 and solitude, [41](#) –42
 and work, [33](#) –36, [144](#) –145
 longevity, and optimism, [112](#)

marital status, and loneliness, [5](#)
 MAX (massive, accelerating, and exponential), [29](#)
 mental health, [113](#) , [128](#) , [137](#) , [144](#) , [171](#) . *See also* [physical health](#)
 and disconnection, [9](#) –14, [15](#)
 and expression of opinions, [31](#)
 and learning, [173](#)
 and loneliness, [3](#) , [4](#) , [10](#) –11, [13](#) , [109](#)
 and self-continuity, [72](#)
 and social interactions, [43](#)
 and social media, [23](#) , [26](#) –27, [29](#) , [152](#)
 and social skills, [17](#) –18
 moral rules of communities, [61](#) –63
 mutualism, [11](#) –12

nature, spending time in, [172](#)

neighborhood diversity, [82](#)
net promoter score (NPS), [86](#)
neuroticism, [24](#), [81](#)
news
 bad news in social media, [28](#)–29
 information overload, [32](#)
nonverbal communication, [37](#)
norms of community, [58](#)–59, [62](#), [63](#), [66](#)
notifications, and hustle culture, [39](#)
NPS. *See* [net promoter score](#)

obligation, [34](#), [69](#)–71, [125](#), [147](#), [148](#)
older adults, loneliness among, [4](#)–5, [34](#)
open expectations, and friendship, [100](#)
openness, [59](#), [81](#), [104](#), [127](#), [143](#)
opinion sharing, resistance in, [31](#)–32
optimism, [96](#), [112](#)–114, [173](#), [175](#), [177](#)
overly demanding friendship, [156](#)
overwhelmingness, [30](#), [31](#), [32](#)
oxytocin, [12](#), [78](#)

parasocial relationships, [151](#)–152
parasympathetic nervous system, [47](#)
Perceived Partner Responsiveness (PPR), [87](#)–88
perceived social isolation (PSI), [23](#)
performance, and connections, [48](#)–53
performance spillover, [50](#)
perseverance, [177](#)–178
personality, [80](#)–81, [145](#), [165](#)
personalization, [125](#)
physical health. *See also* [mental health](#)
 and expression of opinions, [31](#)
 and learning, [173](#)
 and loneliness, [4](#)–5, [14](#)
 and social relationships, [14](#)
 and time poverty, [38](#)
pluralistic ignorance, [23](#)
polarization, [31](#)
population density, [53](#)–54
positive reinforcement, [163](#)
PPR. *See* [Perceived Partner Responsiveness](#)
presence, [12](#), [46](#)–48, [65](#), [107](#), [110](#)
proximity, [159](#)
 perceptions of, [51](#)–52
 and performance, [50](#)–52
PSI. *See* [perceived social isolation](#)
psychological safety, [60](#)

purpose, sense of, [34](#) , [57](#) –58, [69](#) , [74](#) , [78](#) , [79](#) , [144](#) –145, [147](#)

recency effect, [29](#)

reciprocity, [124](#) –127, [156](#) , [166](#)

recognition at work, [145](#)

reconnecting with old friends, [161](#) –162

relationship trust, [88](#)

religion, and group identity, [78](#)

remote work

and loneliness, [34](#) , [35](#) , [36](#)

and social skills, [18](#)

resilience, [46](#) , [49](#) , [120](#) , [176](#) –177

routines, [109](#) , [126](#) , [159](#)

safe harbor friends, [166](#)

satisfaction

customer, [86](#)

job, [10](#) , [49](#) , [111](#) , [122](#) , [145](#)

with life, [9](#) , [82](#) , [122](#) , [136](#) , [173](#)

with relationships, [27](#) , [88](#) , [129](#)

screen time, [37](#) –38

self-awareness, [96](#) –98

self-continuity, sense of, [72](#) –73, [161](#)

self-disclosure, [128](#)

self-esteem, [27](#) , [46](#) , [75](#) , [76](#) , [79](#) , [101](#)

self-silence, [31](#)

sensory overload, [32](#)

shared activities, [134](#) –139

silence

healthy, [133](#) –134

self-silence, [31](#)

situational friendship, [142](#) –143

small talk, [17](#) , [18](#) , [22](#) , [128](#) , [162](#)

social anxiety, [23](#) , [27](#) , [46](#)

social capital, [63](#) –64

social contagion, [66](#) , [124](#)

social exchange theory, [126](#)

social interactions, [18](#) , [43](#) –44, [95](#)

and brain, [10](#) , [44](#)

and cognitive bias, [83](#) , [85](#)

interactions with friends, [115](#) –140

and loneliness, [5](#)

and moral rules, [61](#) –63

and population density, [53](#) –54

quality of, [31](#) , [108](#)

superficial, [22](#) –23, [24](#) , [44](#) , [128](#)

at work, [146](#) –147

social jet lag, [18](#)

social media, [23](#) –28, [69](#) , [149](#) , [162](#)
 bad news in, [28](#) –29
 body doubling in, [12](#)
 comparison effect in, [26](#) –27
 information, [26](#)
 online validation, [27](#)
 and parasocial relationships, [152](#)
 social networks, [48](#) , [52](#) –53, [66](#) –68
 building, [163](#) –166
 diversity of, [82](#)
 social neuroscience, [10](#)
 social penetration theory, [126](#)
 social skills
 decline of, [17](#) –19, [26](#)
 and volunteering, [138](#)
 social support, [13](#) , [43](#) –44, [67](#) , [120](#)
 socialization, [136](#) –137
 solitude, [41](#) –42, [101](#) –102, [171](#) –173
 sports teams, [47](#) , [50](#)
 STEEP framework, [95](#) –96
 stress, [12](#)
 among Gen Zs, [16](#)
 and hustle culture, [39](#) –40
 and information overload, [32](#)
 strong ties, [64](#)
 structure, [95](#) –96
 superficial interactions, [22](#) –23, [24](#) , [44](#) , [128](#)
 Suzuki, Shinichi, [99](#)

task trust, [88](#)
 technology, [21](#) –22, [151](#) –153
 theory of mind, [116](#)
 time
 investment, [8](#) –9, [79](#) , [107](#) –110
 perception of, [172](#)
 poverty, [38](#) –40, [167](#)
 and volunteering, [139](#)
 topics, conversation, [130](#) –133
 toxic positivity, [113](#)
 tragedy of the commons, [70](#) –71
 transition point of life, and finding friends, [143](#)
 transitive relationships, [67](#)
 transparency, [60](#) , [105](#)
 triadic closure, [74](#)
 trust, [30](#) , [60](#) , [86](#) , [87](#) –89, [97](#) , [100](#) , [105](#) , [106](#) , [109](#) , [111](#) , [126](#) , [128](#) , [135](#) , [136](#) , [147](#) , [169](#)

uncertainty, [29](#) –30

vagus nerve, [47](#)

values

of community, [58](#)–59

and identity, [73](#)

social, and friendship, [8](#)

volunteering, [117](#), [138](#)–139

VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous), [29](#)

weak ties, [64](#)–65

work, [x](#), [xiv](#)–xv

and alignment of values with identity, [73](#)–74

building connections at, [144](#)–147

empathetic leaders, [116](#)–117

engagement, and loneliness, [5](#)

friendship at, [14](#)–15, [48](#)–50, [145](#)–149

and Gen Zs, [16](#)–17

job satisfaction, [10](#), [49](#), [111](#), [122](#), [145](#)

locations, and social skills, [18](#)

negative narrative about, [33](#)–36

performance at, [48](#)–53

and personality, [81](#)

physical proximity at, [50](#)–51

recognition at, [145](#)

remote, [18](#), [34](#), [35](#), [36](#)

schedules, [36](#)

social connections at, [14](#)–15

structure for interaction at, [146](#)

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