Level: B2: Upper Intermediate

Skill: Reading

5 Close friends

besties

Five intimate friendships is the optimal number – I scrape two

I felt really uneasy recently. I was listening to Elizabeth Day talking on the radio about her new book Friendaholic and the problems that having too many friends has caused her. It's the same sensation I get reading psychologist Robin Dunbar's famous research on how many relationships we can maintain. Five intimate friendships is the ideal number – I scrape two – and Dunbar said that we can maintain a network of 150 people close enough that it wouldn't be awkward to have a drink with them.

That's Dunbar's number: 150! I'd have to include everyone who walks their dog on my route, my whole Pilates class and half the street to reach that number, and not knowing most of their names would surely make it awkward. I mean, I can be awkward with my two intimate friends on bad days.

It's easy to feel inadequate about friendships, and I haven't always been a good friend. I don't mean I steal boyfriends or betray trust, but I'm disorganized and bad at prioritizing. I lived for a long time in Brussels, where friendships seemed to be easily formed and quickly forgotten. It gave me bad habits, I think. It has made me thoughtless and careless.

I'm trying to be better because I like the few friends I have managed not to lose and am keen to be a bigger part of their lives. But how? My best friend currently lives more than four hours and a minimum of two trains away. I have a good friend in the US and several in the UK.
and Europe.

It's not ideal. We became friends because we liked each other's company, and ended up not seeing each other much. Meeting up requires planning and expense. There are no spontaneous visits, and that puts pressure on meet-ups: you can't just sit on a sofa with a bag of crisps in silence. Well, you can, of course: my best friend and I do – but there's a tendency to feel it's not enough.

That's silly because friendships grow on regular side-by-side slumping and simple proximity. Dunbar's research has also explored how friendship is supported by the endorphin system, activated when you spend time together. Endorphin-firing activities include eating, drinking, laughing, and telling stories. I don't think anyone has researched parallel sofa-based scrolling yet, but I'm hopeful that gets endorphins flowing too.

It matches what I'm realising about friendship as I try to improve my own – that, like parenting, much of the important stuff happens in small, ordinary moments. That more time is more important than "quality" time. That showing up is an act of love.



It's hard to show up for each other when we're miles away. If being near our friends makes us happier, why don't we all try to do it? I don't know how we make it happen – jobs, homes, kids and parents can make it hard. But it's an interesting thought experiment. Could we try to turn our good friends into our neighbours? I'd probably manage to ruin it somehow, but it would be wonderful to have the chance to try.

LIVEWORKSHEETS

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Key language

Scan the text and find the prepositions that complete the phrasal verbs. Definitions are provided for reference.

- **end** .....: be in a particular place or state after doing something or because of doing it
- **meet** .....: come together with someone, either unexpectedly or as planned
- **grow**..... : be nourished by
- **show** .....: be there for someone

Now complete the sentences using the verbs in the correct form.

1. I can't believe she..... uninvited!

2. The best relationships.....trust and respect.

3. He is such an involved dad – he always .....to all his daughter's matches.

4. She is going to London next month and is planning to .....with two friends from college.

Write a short opinion about this statement:

"Not everyone has time for friends, and that is OK"

LIVEWORKSHEETS