

## What's the ideal number of friends?

By Tom Geoghegan  
BBC News Magazine

**The more friends you have, the more you earn, says a study. But modern life can allow little time to maintain meaningful relationships, so what's the optimum number of friends?**

It's widely accepted that friendships are invaluable to the soul but few of us were aware that they could also boost the bank account.

A study of 10,000 US students over a period of 35 years suggests the wealthiest people are those that had the most friends at school. Each extra schoolfriend added 2% to the salary.

The researchers said this was because the workplace is a social setting and those with the best social skills prosper in management and teamwork.

### 'I HAVE 700 FRIENDS'

- Toks Timson, 41, from Croydon, has 707 Facebook friends
- 'I actually know or have met or worked with or went to school with or am related to at least 550.'
- 'The others are just friends of friends or random adds from people.'
- 'Having that number of friends is a lot of work for sure. I'm a bit of a raver and also someone who makes friends easily.'

If a wide circle of friends is taken as a popularity indicator, does that mean the more you have the more successful and happy you are? Or can you have too many? What is the best number?

The average number is about 150, says leading anthropologist Robin Dunbar.

It may sound like a lot, but think of your Christmas card list - 50 cards to 50 couples = 100 friends.

"It's the number of people that you know as persons and you know how they fit into your social world and they know how you fit into theirs. They are a group of people to which you have an obligation of friendship."

They usually consist of an inner circle of five "core" people and an additional layer of 10, he says. That makes 15 people - some will probably be family members - who are your central group and then outside that, there's another 35 in the next circle and another 100 on the outside. And that's one person's social world.

**" Aristotle said friends must have eaten salt together "**  
Philosopher Mark Vernon

Friendships help us develop as people, says Mark Vernon, author of *The Philosophy of Friendship*, but the very term "friend" covers a whole range of relationships. You have a very close friendship with your partner but with others it may just be a common interest or history or simply children the same age.

"Aristotle said friends must have eaten salt together and what he meant is there's a sense that people have lived a significant part of their life together. They've sat down and shared meals and the ups and downs of life.

"You really have to have mulled over things with them to become really good friends and there's only so many people you can do that with.

"You can have friends because of what you do together or enjoy something together like football or shopping, but they're not as profound friends as those who you love for themselves because of something in their character. And it doesn't matter what you're doing with them, even sitting alone in a room."

### **'One in, one out'**

There's a limit to how many close friends like this you can have and it's probably between six and 12, he says.

"I think this idea that you can have virtually limitless numbers of friends does water down the concept of friendship. I think it's one of those things where less is more."

Not if you're a socialite like designer Nicky Haslam, who recently threw a party for 800 friends. But even people who don't inhabit the heady world of fashion and celebrity have too many friends to manage.

A newspaper columnist once told of her shock when, having struck up a rapport with a man over dinner, she was told at the end of the meal he had no vacancies for friends. He was operating a "one-in, one-out" policy. Six months later she received a card stating he was now available for friendship.

That's an extreme example but many people view their friendships scientifically and regulate them accordingly.

#### **'I STREAMLINE FRINGE FRIENDS'**

- Penny, a 35-year-old mum of two in Brighton, says she has 12 good friends but of those would only really confide in four
- 'There's not enough hours in the day or days in the week to see everyone.
- 'Certain people ask if I'm around to meet and I don't really want to commit because I've got other people I want to see.
- 'So you do start streamlining, but your oldest friends are always there.'

Julie, a 34-year-old PR consultant in London, says she has three categories of friends. Firstly there are nine close friends - the Premier League - whom she could ring any time of day or night and they would drop everything and come if necessary.

"I try to see them every few weeks and speak at least once a fortnight. I have a rota in my head and try and ring one of them each night as I drive home from work. It shows how pressured we are for time that speaking to friends is multi-tasking."

Julie's next social group has about 20 people, mostly men, whom she would see every couple of months, then there are more than 100 people beyond that on the outer fringes - friends from work, friends from her last job and friends from travelling.

"There are two people whom I don't really want to stay friends with but I don't have the heart to say no to. People I used to work with, they invite you to dinner and then you feel you have to invite them back, but you really don't have the time and it gets really stressful, especially since getting a boyfriend.

"I want to spend two nights a week with him, two nights to myself at home and two nights at the gym, so that leaves one night to see people."

There is a perception that as society has become more mobile, and traditional family bonds have loosened, friendships have become more fleeting. But on the other hand, modern technology has meant we can stay in touch with more people than ever.

"First email, then mobile, and now social networking sites like Facebook have made it much easier for people to grow their circle of friends beyond their immediate inner circle," says digital media expert Dan Clays of BLM Quantum.

"But the swelling is predominantly in the outer-reaches of their circle, and often the fringe group. If you were to examine the profile of someone's group of friends on Facebook, the probability is that a large contingent were accepted as friends out of curiosity and after an initial exchange, the level of dialogue slows down to a trickle."

This is especially apparent in the 16-24 audience group, the digital generation, he says, so it will be interesting to see if they are able to maintain that contact later in life.

But maybe we're too fixated on numbers, says Mr Vernon.

"Ask yourself about the quality of your friendships, not about the quantity."

### **For the sake of friendship, some names have been changed**

#### **Below is a selection of your comments.**

I believe that humans are evolved to exist in social groups of about half a dozen people. Any larger than that and we lose track and the inter-relations become just too much stay on top of. I have less than a dozen people I would call true 'friends'. Everybody else is just an acquaintance. I don't think I'm particularly unusual in this respect, I just think I'm being honest with myself. There's no way anybody could genuinely have hundreds of friends of any meaningful kind.

**Andy, Staffordshire, UK**

I find the idea of "quantifying" friendship in such a way devalues it.

**Bill Gribble, Gloucester, UK**

I thought this article was very interesting. My husband and I find it quite a challenge to "manage" our friends because we have lived and worked in five different areas including overseas. One major factor which has not been mentioned is the significance of whether the friends also know each other. This can have a great influence on the feasibility of staying in touch since it increases the indirect contact with each other and facilitates the meeting of several friends at one time when re-visiting an area or country. This therefore affects how many friends it is possible or desirable to have.

**Sue, Brussels**

I am not sure whether it is an indicator of the times, or my antisocial tendencies, but there are members of my "inner circle" (of around 8-10 close confidantes) who I have not seen, or spoken to in five years; however we do exchange messages online several times a week, and I feel far closer to them than I do to some of my "lower league" friends I see on a daily basis. Perhaps those struggling to keep up with their friends need to start a blog network to keep each other up to date?

**CS, Dorset**

I've always been slightly concerned that I don't seem to have as many friends as I think I should. I know a lot of people, but would I call them friends? However, my mind has finally been put at ease, as I fit into Robin Dunbar's model perfectly. I also have the added benefit that my "core" group consists of myself and my fiancée, along with two other couples, something I've been told is quite rare. Maybe I'm richer than I thought.

**James Macinnes, Croydon**

A friend is the one who comes to the police station at 3am to pay your bail, a best friend is the one who is sitting next to you in the cell saying "dude, did you see that?!!"

**Dave B (Brit-ex pat), Keswick, Canada**

"Friends" is such a vague term. For me that has to be someone I trust. I do not trust people as a noun. Love. Now that I define as someone I would give my life for with out question. I have maybe five people whom I love and that includes both sexes. A good article and thanks for presenting the subject  
**Willis Marshall, New Bloomfield, Missouri, US**

My friends are the ones whom I can turn up on the door step at four in the morning and know there will be a cup of tea and a friendly face - not the online collect-a-friend game. I think it is important to cut the deadwood and weed out friends when friendships fizzle out. Who wants to be friends with someone you sat next to in history class 10 years ago but now you have nothing else in common? Perhaps you dislike thier husband or freakish family - you shouldn't have to put up with being friends for friends sake. Good friends are hard to come by and friendships are forged through laughter, tears and most importantly of all, tolerance of bad habits. A bit like relationships really.

**Jenny Barratt, Sheffield**

If you can count your friends on one hand, you've done well. Mum always said this to me when I was a kid and I never got it until I was in my mid-20s, but it's very true. I do indeed have four real friends. People just don't get the meaning of the word friend though. There are friends, ie people who know you well, you confide in, could ring any time day or night, nothing changes regardless how long it's been since you see them, have shared history, issues and pasts with, are always open and honest with you, and you know they will be part of your future. Secondly, there are mates, people who you see, have a pint with sometimes, and generally get on with, and enjoy their company more often than not. Then lastly, there are associates, ie people you only really see because you don't have a choice, get on with to make life easier, but may or may not like overly. People such as workmates fall into this group. Unfortunately, the groups get bigger as they go down the scale, but this might not be bad, and to be honest, how many friends do you need? Also, people do indeed move to and from each group, but that's life isn't it. Just a handful sounds fine to me though.

**Chris Handley, Salford, UK**

I think the idea of having hundreds of 'friends' on a social networking site is horrible. It takes a certain kind of vain and attention seeking nature to actually want that. No-one can possibly know so many people. When I first started out on Facebook, I was quite relaxed with who I let add me as a friend. Over time, it just became an annoyance. In the end, I kept only people who I'd have round for dinner. It went down to 14! Since then, I abandoned that site altogether.

**Dave, Leeds UK**

Every good-hearted person can be a friend but a true friend is that one whom you will miss so much after not talking to after two to four days. This is a friend from whom you will seek opinion and they are true to you. This is a person who goes an extra mile to be there when you need them. A person whom you can't let anything, I mean nothing, get between your friendship. Let it be money, men/women, jealousy, jobs, etc. Just be true to yourself and your true friends will be true to you. Those who won't be true to you in the process, then they are not true friends.

**BMJ Kashari, Kampala, Uganda**

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