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FAMILY TIES

The Significance of Two, Four, Six, and More

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

When thinking of a “group” or “community,” we don’t necessarily think of two. However, the pair bond number is important to establish and maintain a working relationship, friendship, or trustworthy commitment to another. A personal bond with another answers a deep longing in our hearts. As Ecclesiastes 4:9 reads, “Two can accomplish more than twice as much as one, for the results can be much better.” Many people don’t feel connected to a larger group until they have established at least one dyad relationship within it.

A group of four is a good number for a conversation, which is vitally important to establish friendships, allies, and supportive relationships. Conversation is the primary way we judge each other’s trustworthiness and affirm one another. When a fifth person is added, one often becomes marginalized or two start a separate conversation. Golfers find more business deals are made on the golf course than in the board room. A golfing foursome offers informal opportunities for conversations and trustworthiness assessment, and then the details are worked out more formally.

Six is the ideal number to get the job done. Six people can divide tasks, and yet the group is small enough for those involved to make decisions quickly. Larger groups take much longer to agree on courses of action. Also, groups of six can be split into dyads or triads for other tasks.

Groups of six can accomplish tasks, but aren’t large enough for productive brainstorming sessions. If you have a group of ten to 12, divide the group into two to get the tasks done more easily after brainstorming.

Twelve is the ideal number to build a strong team connection to reach a common goal. Sports teams and juries are examples. When teamwork is required to reach a difficult or long-term goal, consider recruiting 12 (or ten to 15) people.

Twelve is the number of people most persons hold in their personal “empathy group.” This is your close inner circle, the people most counted upon for support, loyalty, and intimacy. These are friends who are usually contacted at least once a month and with whom they feel a strong connection.

One’s heart/head group is an intermediate group, between 12 and 150 people. Less intimate than our empathy group, these are friends and colleagues whom we contact less frequently, but they still hold a significant place in our affection and thinking. They are more emotionally and intellectually significant than our community group.

One hundred fifty makes a community! There is both historical and current evidence that shows us that to function well a person needs to be part of a group of about 150—a tribe, a clan, or a village. This community cohesion and support is important for the well-being of individuals and families and for the maintenance of cultural values. For more reading in this area, I suggest Robin Dunbar’s *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language*.

What does this mean for us individually? It is healthy to become more intentional about contributions to our family members, our growing “empathy” group, groups we work in outside the family, and our larger community. In this fragmented world, where many don’t even know their neighbors, we can lose track of the important ways our giving benefits the whole group.

I encourage you to think about ways to use these ideas as you continue your Christian journey in your immediate family, at work, in your empathy group, in your church, and community.



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