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With a Little Help From My Friends...

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With a Little Help From My Friends...

By Meg Scharf
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Do I have enough friends?

Listening to a recent TEDx lecture made me pause and think about it.

It caught my interest, so now I must really begin to ask myself, is this true, do I have enough friends?

Yes, I'll confirm it: I *think* I actually do have enough friends.

The TEDx presentation was on NPR one weekend afternoon. It was given by Robin Dunbar, an evolutionary psychologist at Oxford University. He has long engaged in the study of social groups and the interaction of friends and family.

The number of friendships we can sustain is actually controlled by our brain's neocortex, he said. The "Dunbar number," as it is known, is the average number of friends we can have at any particular time. That number is between 120 and 130, or could be as high as 150.

I was skeptical, since I thought that everyone's ability to create and sustain friendships was based on their own dispositions as introvert, extrovert, optimist or pessimist. I also suspected that living situations are a variable: I work at a large university in a major metropolitan area, and I am a member of several large groups, so opportunities are created for me to make many friends.

No. No matter what I do, my mind cannot sustain any more than 150 friends at one time, according to Dunbar.

The psychologist defines these 150 friends as people one would want to invite to a big party of friends.

These friends are in layers. There are five that are closest to us, or four if we have a romantic partner. These friends are the most essential to our overall well-being. They tend to have more permanence in our lives. They will help us in a crisis.

As one of six close siblings, I was surprised to hear that brothers and sisters don't play a role in this inner circle. However, siblings tend to react to us in ways we have come to expect. Dunbar says that our friends can surprise us, react to us in ways that are more stimulating than interactions with siblings. And that increases our well-being.

Outer layers of friends are less intimate. I think, however, that those other layers are helpful in a variety of crises. If the loaf of bread you are trying to bake refuses to rise, you do not necessarily call your most intimate friend; a nearby friend or neighbor with some baking expertise might be your best resource.

A work friend can encourage you when a challenge looms or answer a question you might be afraid to ask anyone else because you think it will make you look naive or stupid.

Parents of your children's friends can reassure you that their children "went through the same phase."

The greatest factor in sustaining friendships is interactions with friends – that is, doing things together. Time spent on activities with friends is the major determinant of the strength and endurance of friendships. It all comes down to our time, a limited commodity.

And that is why the people in our pool of 150 friends shift constantly, dependent on seeing, talking to, interacting, and spending time with these friends.

So what about Facebook friends, Twitter followers, blog posters. Are they are friends? Of course not. Although we interact with some of these folks online, it is not the real-time interaction we need and crave.

I tried counting friends to see if I am measuring up to Dunbar's mark. It's hard to focus on this effort: somewhere around 120, I gave up.

But I am content with knowing I am capable of having enough friendships to sustain me.

Maybe I should just make the effort to be pleasant today. If I am not too crabby, I may meet someone who could become part of my "Dunbar number."

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