

The Myth of the Adult Friend Group

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I grew up watching TV shows like *Friends* and *Sex and The City*, which glamorized a tight-knit group of adult friends who hang out together almost daily. I have spent my whole adult life trying to chase that fantasy, but it never materialized.

I have a friend I meet for dinners only, another I play tennis with, and a different one for dance classes. When I combined them together at a dinner party in the hopes that they'd become friends with each other, it never worked out. Either they don't have anything in common and it's awkward, or they have so much in common that I get pushed out and they start hanging out without me.

I remember being so jealous when a guy I dated celebrated his birthday three times with three different friend groups: once with childhood friends, once with university friends, and once with work friends. Here I was desperately trying to curate at least one friend group that could be consistent and he had three. How unfair!

But research shows that the tensions many adults feel around friendship may stem less from personal failure and more from how social connection actually works in adulthood. One recent survey found that 59% of people wish they had a larger social circle, while 20% report [struggling with loneliness](#). Other research shows that people who have close confidants report [higher life satisfaction](#) and lower rates of depression.

This points to a mismatch between expectation and reality. The cultural ideal of a cohesive friend group may be harder to sustain than we imagine. In practice, emotional well-being often depends on maintaining a few reliable, intimate relationships. That may help explain why many adults naturally gravitate towards one-on-one, or dyad friendships.

To understand this from a psychological perspective, I reached out to Suzanne Degges-White, a licensed counselor and relationship expert at the personal growth app [Headway](#) and professor and chair of the Counseling and Higher Education department at Northern Illinois University. She told me that if we strip away the polished version of friendship portrayed in TV shows, then we would see that it's easier to maintain reciprocity between two friends than it is in larger groups.

“Dyad friendships allow you to learn more about one another at a much deeper level, and this increases understanding

and empathy between friends," Degges-White told me. "This also allows friends to have a clearer understanding of one's needs, such as being heard, seen, interested, and supported." In the absence of external noise from a group, she added, "minor tensions are easier to talk through and resolve."

We also have cognitive limits on maintaining stable relationships, which may explain why deep connections are sustained in smaller, more focused interactions rather than in groups. A 2023 [Pew Research Center survey](#) found that a [majority of adults](#) (53%) say they have between one and four close friends, 38% say they have five or more friends, and 8% say they have no close friends. These findings reinforce the idea that adult friendships are usually about investing deeply in a few meaningful friendships. Quality matters more than quantity.

When I'm in a big group of friends, I often find myself performing—trying to be the funniest or the most clever to get validation from the group. And then, at times, being in a group has been so over-stimulating that I would barely say a word.

In my one-on-one friendships, I am the most comfortable. It's only in that emotionally intimate safe space that I have been able to be vulnerable and discuss my fears as well as my deepest thoughts.

Opening up deeply in a group can change its dynamic, especially if no one else is able to do so, explained Degges-White. Vulnerability can be compromised if one person turns the topic into a joke, or another stays silent or isn't fully engaged. I have often feared rejection in group dynamics.

I remember when I was in high school, I was part of multiple different friend groups. It gave me the safety net that if one group rejected me, I could always hop on to the other one. It was also a protective mechanism to never let myself emotionally depend on one friendship, so I wouldn't be let down.

Now as an adult, I [hold my friends to a certain standard](#) and appreciate my one-on-one friends who have the emotional bandwidth to handle my complexity. There's also [evidence that reciprocal](#), one-on-one ties tend to be stronger and more influential than broader social connections because they involve mutual investment and emotional exchange.

Read more: [*How I Manifested Better Friendships*](#)

Emotional investment is what I value most in people. A good friend really wants to connect and spend quality time with me. Others only want to have a good time, so they can post a group picture on social media to get the social approval of appearing to have a large group of friends.

Groups also bring conflict. When people hang out in settings that are larger than one-on-one, Degges-White told me, coalitions can form. We compete for closeness, and it's easy to feel left out. "That is precisely why, in groups of friends, it is not major betrayals that cause pain as much as it is small things: who called whom separately, who replied to whom faster, who became closer," she said.

We're wired for one-on-one intimacy. I realized recently that I was chasing the wrong structure this entire time. Because when I look at the friendships that have actually sustained me—the ones where my friends have seen me ugly cry over a breakup or have come over to help me pack during a move—they have always been one-on-one.

Letting go for the longing of a friendship group has brought me immense pride because it meant that my friendships were based on reciprocity and emotional safety rather than proving myself to the outside world. I once [heard the quote](#), "You can tell how much you love yourself by the partner that you've chosen." And I think about that in terms of friendships, too.

We are often taught to measure our social lives by how many people we can gather in a room. But quality matters over quantity. Just like in romantic relationships, friendship is just two people choosing each other over and over again.