Study finds rekindling old friendships as scary as making new ones

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Psychologists from Simon Fraser University (SFU) and the University of Sussex have found that people are as hesitant to reach out to an old friend as they are to strike up a conversation with a stranger, even when they had the capacity and desire to do so. The new research is published today in the journal *Communications Psychology*.

Scientific research has shown that social relationships are important to human happiness, and that the greater the number and range of friendships that we engage with, the better our well-being. But once relationships are formed, some will naturally wax and wane, with many of us losing touch with friends and family that we were once close with.

As old friends who had reconnected themselves, Professor Lara Aknin from SFU and Dr. Gillian Sandstrom from the University of Sussex in Brighton (U.K.) were keen to find out what stops other people from doing the same.

Sandstrom, senior lecturer in the psychology of kindness and director of the Sussex Centre for Research on Kindness said, "We live in a time when people are more and more disconnected, and have fewer close friends than they used to in years past. And this is despite the multitude of modern-day communication channels available to us. With research finding that it takes more than 200 hours of contact to turn a new acquaintance into a close friend, we wanted to find out if and why people were overlooking another pathway to meaningful connection: reviving pre-existing close friendships."

Across seven studies, the psychologists examined the attitudes of almost 2,500 participants to reconnecting with lapsed friendships, the barriers and reasons for doing so, and whether targeted interventions could encourage them to send that first message to an old friend.

"We found that the majority of participants (90%) in our first study had lost touch with a someone they still care about. Yet, a significant number (70%) were neutral, or even negative, about the idea of getting back in touch in that moment, even when they felt warmly about the friendship," says Aknin, director of the Helping and Happiness Lab at SFU and co-author of the paper.

Recognizing that people sometimes say one thing and do another, the psychologists designed a study to see how many people were willing to actually reach out to an old friend. Even when participants wanted to reconnect, thought the friend would be appreciative, had their contact information, and were given time to draft and send a message, only about a third actually sent it (28% in one study and 37% in another study).

The psychologists set out to benchmark this hesitance to reconnect by getting participants to rate their willingness to immediately carry out a range of activities, including calling or texting a friend they had lost touch with. They found that participants were as reluctant to reach out to an old friend as they were to strike up a conversation with a stranger—or even to pick up rubbish.

The top reported barriers included fears that one's old friend might not want to hear from them, that it would be "too awkward after all this time," and feeling "guilty." A perception of being too busy—both the old friend and the participant—was the lowest cited reason for not reaching out.

Notably, the psychologists found that participants believed there were only a few legitimate reasons to get in touch, with the friend's birthday reported as the most compelling. Reconnecting over the memory of a shared experience was the second most reported reason. Participants were least likely to consider getting in touch with an old friend to ask

them a favor.

As part of the research, the psychologists tested targeted interventions, responding to the findings from four of the studies. Taking inspiration from a previous intervention conducted by Sandstrom on talking with strangers, they found that practicing social connection with current networks by first sending a message to a warm friend, was the most successful strategy, boosting reach-out rates by over two thirds.

Sandstrom explained, "Interestingly, despite people telling us that a key barrier to making contact with an old friend was concerns over how the message might be received, the intervention that we devised to help overcome this anxiety had little effect.

"Given that participants were as hesitant to reach out to a stranger as someone they had previously been close with, we drew inspiration from previous research I had conducted on talking to strangers, which found that practice made progress. When people were given time to practice in a situation that felt more comfortable, namely by sending messages to current friends, they were much more likely to make the leap to messaging someone they had lost touch with."

Aknin adds, "We know from decades of research that social relationships are a key source of happiness and meaning in our lives.

"Gillian and I are old friends, dating back to our time as Ph.D. students in Canada. We've been in touch on-and-off ever since, but most recently reconnected on New Year's Day 2022 when I emailed her to say that I missed her and wanted to collaborate on a new project. We took inspiration from our period of disconnection and decided to study if and when people are willing to reach out to old friends. We hope these findings prompt other people to send that first message to someone that they miss in their lives."

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