Friends enjoy being reached out to more than we think

People consistently underestimate how much others in their social circle might appreciate an unexpected phone call, text or email just to say hello, and the more surprising the connection, the greater the appreciation, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

"People are fundamentally social beings and enjoy connecting with others," said lead author Peggy Liu, Ph.D., of the University of Pittsburgh. "There is much research showing that maintaining social connections is good for our mental and physical health. However, despite the importance and enjoyment of social connection, our research suggests that people significantly underestimate how much others will appreciate being reached out to."

The research was published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.

Researchers conducted a series of experiments involving more than 5,900 participants that explored how accurate people are at estimating how much others might appreciate an attempt to connect and what factors might play into that level of appreciation.

In one experiment, half the participants were asked to recall the last time they reached out to someone in their social circle "just because" or "just to catch up" via email, text or phone, after a prolonged period of not interacting with them. The rest of the participants were asked to recall a similar situation where someone reached out to them. Participants were then asked to indicate on a 7-point scale (1=not at all, 7=to a great extent) how much either they or the person they reached out to (depending upon the condition) appreciated, felt grateful, felt thankful or felt pleased by the contact. People who recalled reaching out thought the gesture they recalled was significantly less appreciated than those who recalled receiving a communication.

In other experiments, participants sent a short note, or a note and a small gift, to someone in their social circle with whom they had not interacted in a while. Similar to the previous experiment, participants who initiated contact were asked to rate on a 7-point scale the extent to which they thought the recipient would appreciate, feel grateful for, and feel pleased by the contact. After the notes/gifts were sent, researchers also asked the recipients to rate their appreciation.

Across all experiments, those who initiated the communication significantly underestimated the extent to which recipients would appreciate the act of reaching out. The researchers also found one interesting variable that affected how much a person appreciated a reach out.

"We found that people receiving the communication placed greater focus than those initiating the communication on the surprise element, and this heightened focus on surprise was associated with higher appreciation," said Liu. "We also found that
people underestimated others' appreciation to a greater extent when the communication was more surprising, as opposed to part of a regular communication pattern, or the social ties between the two participants were weak."

Many people have lost touch with others in their lives, whether they’re friends from high school or college or co-workers they used to see at the water cooler before work went remote, according to Liu. Initiating social contact after a prolonged period of disconnect can feel daunting because people worry about how such a gesture might be received. These findings suggest that their hesitations may be unnecessary, as others are likely to appreciate being reached out to more than people think.

"I sometimes pause before reaching out to people from my pre-pandemic social circle for a variety of reasons. When that happens, I think about these research findings and remind myself that other people may also want to reach out to me and hesitate for the same reasons," Liu said. "I then tell myself that I would appreciate it so much if they reached out to me and that there is no reason to think they would not similarly appreciate my reaching out to them."