FRIENDSHIP RECESSION

Difficult to Avoid, Important to Address

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FRIENDSHIP is the foundation of social relationships, an integral part of human life. It plays a vital role in personal development, emotional well-being, and overall happiness. However, in recent years, we have been witnessing a concerning phenomenon known as "friendship recession". The term refers to the decrease in the quality and quantity of friends. It could have potential consequences on mental health, social connectedness, and societal harmony.

Friendship is an important and under-appreciated relationship that impacts our health and well-being. Studies suggest that lacking close friends can be as detrimental to our health as smoking cigarettes. However, measuring friendships and determining their quality and quantity is challenging. Many people are reluctant to admit their loneliness due to the stigma attached to it.

Friendships can be formed in various ways — through schools, at work, during activities, or through online connections. Historically, friendship groups have had a tribal size of around 12-15 people, with most individuals having at least three or four close friends.

Dr Aruna Broota, renowned psychologist, says, "It is important to have a good circle of friends as we cannot always rely on our family members for everything. Often, we find solace in a close friend who offers unwavering support and helps us overcome difficulties. However, if we are unable to maintain numerous friendships, it may lead to a sense of isolation."

Anurag, a media person, is fascinated with the concept of friendship and shares the change friends have brought in his life. "Friendship has been a source of stability and growth in my life. My closest friends have been my support system during challenging times, helping me through heartbreak, career uncertainties, and personal struggles. They have always been there to lend a listening ear and offer guidance, and I am forever grateful for their unwavering support and love."

Ancient philosophers like Aristotle valued friendship for its equality and lack of transactional nature. In recent times, traditional institutions like family and religion have declined, increasing the need for social connections outside of these structures, making friends even more important. According to studies by the Brookings Institution, a research organisation in Washington DC, 15% of today's youth say they do not have any close friends, compared to only 3% in the 1990s.

This indicates an increase in the number of people who lack friends.

A survey conducted by the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER) found that there is a growing concern about social isolation and loneliness in India, commonly referred to as the "friendship recession". The survey aimed to understand the causes and consequences of this issue and suggested various solutions to address it. Findings highlighted the increasing reliance on digital communication platforms, work patterns, urbanisation, and the decline of extended family systems as factors contributing to the decline in meaningful friendships. The consequences of friendship recession include mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. The ICRIER proposed promoting social interaction in schools, colleges, and workplaces, encouraging community activities, nurturing hobbies and interests, and fostering inclusive urban planning to combat these negative effects.

Causes of Friendship Recession

Experts point out several factors that contribute to friendship recession, including societal changes, lifestyle shifts, and the increasing influence of technology. According to a report by UK-based news website *The Guardian*, in 2014 people spent six and a half hours a week with close friends, but by 2021 this figure has come down to just two hours and 45 minutes.

Having friends is crucial for our overall well-being. Piya a housewife, is grateful for having friends in her life. "Friendship has always been an essential part of my life. Growing up, I had a close-knit group of friends who supported and encouraged me. We shared everything, from laughter and joy to tears and hardships. Their unconditional love and understanding helped me navigate through difficult times, and I am grateful for their presence in my life."

Nipun, a financial analyst, speaks about toxic friends and says that the time he was struggling for getting new friends was actually the friendship recession phase. "Friendship has been a rollercoaster ride for me. I have had my fair share of toxic friendships that drained my energy and self-esteem. It took me a while to realise that being surrounded by negative influences was hindering my personal growth. Once I cut ties with toxic people, I discovered the beauty of healthy and nurturing friendships. It's crucial to surround yourself with people who uplift and inspire you."

A major factor contributing to the friendship recession is the rise of social media and technology. While these platforms have made it easier to connect with others, they can also create a false sense of connection. People may have hundreds of online friends, but these relationships often lack depth and intimacy. Additionally, excessive screen time can replace face-to-face interactions, leading to a decrease in meaningful friendships.

Work-life balance is another contributing factor. With longer working hours and increased job demands, people have less time for socialising and cultivating friendships. Many individuals prioritise their careers, often at the expense of their social lives. This can result in feelings of isolation and a lack of support networks.

Societal norms and cultural shifts also play a role in friendship recession. Traditional notions of community and social bonds have eroded, as individuals are more focused on individualism and self-interest. This can make it more difficult to form and maintain friendships, as people may have different priorities and lifestyles.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the friendship recession. Social distancing measures and lockdowns limited social interactions and made it challenging to meet new people or maintain existing friendships. During our conversation with a group of people, they remember the lockdown days and the suffering of losing friends. "I have definitely noticed a friendship recession lately, especially after the pandemic," Yashraj, a student, recalls. "It's like everyone is so caught up in their own lives that they forget to make time for each other. It's made me more appreciative of the few friends I have left and has motivated me to put in more effort to maintain those connections."

For others it is a lesson for a lifetime. Nipun confesses, "Friendship recession has taught me not to take relationships for granted. It's made me more grateful for the connections I have and has reminded me to prioritise nurturing those relationships. I have become more proactive in reaching out, checking in, and making sure my friends know they're valued and loved."

The 11-3-6 Rule of Friendship

According to a survey conducted by YouGov in 2019, 1 in 4 Indians reported having no friends at all. So the 11-3-6 rule can be helpful. It is a scientific concept that suggests it takes a specific process and time frame for friendships to develop. According to a February 2023 report on *Medium*, it takes six months for an acquaintance to transform into a genuine friendship, and this transformation relies on approximately 11 different encounters, each lasting about three hours.

The 11 encounters mentioned in the rule refer to intentional interactions with the acquaintance. These encounters could include activities such as hanging out, having conversations, sharing experiences, or participating in mutual hobbies. The three-hour timeframe for each encounter allows for meaningful conversations and interactions to take place, fostering a deeper understanding and strengthening the bond between individuals.

However, the effectiveness of the 11-3-6 rule may vary depending on the individuals involved and the nature of their interactions. It is important to note that genuine friendships can develop in different ways and time frames, as people have varying personalities, preferences, and circumstances. Ultimately, the rule serves as a guideline rather than an absolute formula for making friends.

Some experts are not very convinced with the rule. They suggest, "There are no mathematical formulas for forming friendships. Friendship is based on a connection, a mutual understanding and willingness to support and help each

other. It involves giving time, making sacrifices, and offering assistance. However, if someone is only taking advantage of you without reciprocating, then they cannot be considered a true friend."

Dr Aruna Broota remembers a song that captures the essence of this idea, 'Pyaar de, pyaar le' which translates to 'Give love, take love'. "Friendship should not be based on gaining likes or receiving material gifts. Unfortunately, our friendships have been affected by a decline in values and the rise of materialism, impatience, and artificiality. In the age of social media, we may receive numerous likes that make us feel good about ourselves, but we may lack genuine friends who truly understand us."

'Pause and Play' in Friendship

Like any other relationship, friendships also go through ups and downs. At times, conflicts, misunderstandings, or simply the demands of life can create distance between friends. That is where the pause-and-play rule of friendship comes into play. This is a concept that emphasises the importance of taking breaks, stepping back, and giving each other space when needed. It allows friends to navigate through challenging situations while preserving their bond and ensuring its long-term sustainability.

When conflicts arise or when both parties feel overwhelmed, it is crucial to recognise the need for a pause. This pause does not mean the end of the friendship but rather a temporary break to reflect, reevaluate, and regain perspective. This rule enables friends to take a step back and assess the situation objectively without immediate emotional reactions.

During the pause period, it is important to focus on self-reflection. This entails contemplating one's feelings, thoughts, and actions, and understanding how they may have contributed to the conflict. This self-analysis allows individuals to gain insight into themselves and what they can do to enhance the friendship.

Neeta shared her experience, "One of the most valuable lessons I have learned about friendship is the power of forgiveness. At one point, I had a falling out with a close friend over a misunderstanding. We went months without speaking, and it took a toll on both of us. However, we eventually were able to communicate and address the issue. Forgiving each other allowed our friendship to grow stronger, reminding me that bonds can stay strong both parties are willing to work on it."

After the pause, when both friends have gained clarity and a better understanding of the situation, it is time to play again. The play here refers to resuming the friendship with a fresh perspective and a renewed commitment to its success. This part of the rule involves initiating open and honest conversations where both parties can express their feelings and concerns, while also actively listening to one another.

In India, the concept of friendship within relationships holds great importance due to the value placed on relationships. One reason friendship is highly valued in Indian relationships is because it cultivates trust, open communication, and mutual understanding. Another important aspect of friendship within relationships in India is the sense of companionship it brings. Having a friend within a relationship creates a strong feeling of togetherness. This friendship helps create a harmonious partnership where both individuals feel supported, loved, and cherished.

Psychologist Dr Aruna Broota opines, "It is not a good thing to have less friends. We cannot share everything with our family members. Many times a friend from outside is close to our heart because s/he supports us no matter what. S/He encourages us to feel good again. But if you are not able to handle many friends then there is recession."

She adds, "There are various types of friendships to be found, but the key is to find someone who you have faith in, is of similar age, and will keep your secrets. This is crucial. Sometimes, the children of the family next door can be helpful, as well as distant relatives. Friendships often develop faster when there are shared interests, such as enjoying activities, playing, painting, or cooking. When you open up and share your thoughts and ideas, good suggestions emerge, leading to the growth of friendship over time."

To have a strong and fulfilling friendship, one must follow certain principles:

1. **Be supportive:** Friends should be there for each other in times of need, offering emotional support and encouragement.
2. **Communicate regularly:** Check in with your friend, ask about their day, and share your thoughts and feelings.
3. **Show empathy and understanding:** Validate their emotions and be there to listen without judgment.
4. **Be trustworthy:** Keep your promises, respect their privacy, and be honest and loyal.
5. **Respect boundaries:** Be mindful of your friend's personal space, privacy, and limits.
6. **Be non-judgmental:** Avoid being critical or judgmental and accept them for who they are and embrace their differences.
7. **Support personal growth:** Celebrate their achievements and be there to help them overcome obstacles.
8. **Have fun and create memories:** Enjoy each other's company and make an effort to spend quality time together.
9. **Practice forgiveness:** Learn to forgive and let go of grudges to maintain healthy and long-lasting friendship.
10. **Be honest and open:** Share your thoughts and feelings openly with your friend and encourage them to do the same.
11. **Show appreciation:** Express your gratitude & appreciation and let them know that they are valued and loved.

The importance of nurturing and maintaining strong and meaningful friendships can serve to enrich our lives.

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