

How do we develop close social bonds?

Background

Human beings are strongly motivated to develop relationships (Gable & Impett, [2012](#)). It is through our relationships that we expand our sense of self and meet our fundamental need to belong (Aron et al., [2022](#)). Furthermore, our close relationships have been shown to be crucial to our health and wellbeing (O'Rourke & Sidani, [2017](#)). However, we face a wide variety of difficulties in making friends (Apostolou & Keramari, [2020](#)) and many wonder how they can develop close relationships. Answering this question can provide important information for people looking to improve their social life and avert the harmful effects of loneliness and isolation.

Purpose

The purpose of this brief is to review key strategies for developing close relationships. In doing so, we review evidence with respect to four key stages in the relationship developmental process: initiation, formation, development, and maintenance.

Evidence from Existing Studies

Relationship Initiation

The first step in forming a social bond is to initiate a social connection. This means that we need to find ways of meeting people who might be suitable candidates for friendship. Zagic and colleagues' ([2022](#)) review of interventions for social connection note that increasing opportunities for social contact is one of the most important mechanisms by which social health interventions work. To date, two predominate strategies for meeting people have been strongly supported by the extant literature.

The first strategy for meeting others is to leverage propinquity (i.e., the state of being close to others) and mere exposure (i.e., repeated encounters with the same people; Segal, [1974](#)). Indeed, decades of research highlight that repeated encounters with others in one's local community is an effective strategy for social contact (Davidsen et al., [2002](#); de Marti & Zenou., [2013](#); Wellman et al., [1996](#)). As such, spending time in the same place or on the same websites with the same people over and over again gives you more opportunities to strike up conversations with others. Whether it's half way into a semester, the first few weeks on the job, or visiting your go-to coffee shop for the hundredth time, proximity to others is good for meeting people (Moreland & Beach, [1992](#)). Multiple studies support the assertion that exposure to others on a repeated basis improves potential for favorable interaction and liking (Palumbo et al., [2021](#)).

The second strategy for meeting new people is leveraging one's networks (Jackson & Rogers, [2007](#)). Relying on our existing relationships to meet new people is an important strategy for

initiating new relationships. Friends of friends are more likely to be like us and they often come with an endorsement from someone you already trust (Laursen, [2017](#); Nepal et al., [2014](#); Vigier, [2013](#); Campbell, [2014](#); Haselager et al., [1998](#)). Similarly, it is not uncommon for people to befriend their relatives – who are natural choices given the high level of innate trust these ties come with (Rahl & Pevalin, [2005](#)).

Of course, meeting people is not sufficient for creating a friend. We must also create favorable impressions that identify us as potential candidates for deeper connection. To accomplish this, people employ a variety of strategies that signal pro-sociality, including being friendly, polite, agreeable, warm, and engaged. These positive signals highlight our interest in being a friend and increase our perceived value as a potential friend (Stinson et al., [2009](#); Miell & Duck et al., [1986](#)). Indeed, studies suggest that even after just five minutes of social interaction, the level of social interest and cooperativeness we demonstrate is correlated with how much new acquaintances like us (Crandall, [1977](#)). Providing an overall framework for social receptivity, Campbell et al., ([2015](#)) identified reciprocal candor, mutual interest, reasonableness, similarity, and physical attraction as five key factors contributing to greater interpersonal chemistry. Given these factors it is clear that the communication of positive emotions is beneficial for social bonding (Leung, [2002](#)). For example, multiple studies show that positive emotions and expressions, including laughter, serve as a key facilitator for developing closeness with others (Dunbar et al., [2021](#); Dunbar, [2022](#); Dezechache & Dunbar, [2012](#)).

In summary, there are two key hurdles to relationship initiation: The first is finding people to connect with and the second is to signal one's openness, availability, and suitability as a potential friend. These hurdles can be eased by frequenting local spots where you can meet people, leveraging your social network to connect with friends-of-friends, and putting your best foot forward when forming initial impressions.

Relationship Formation

After an initial contact, two potential friends begin the process of forming a relationship. To do so, they first assess the fit of the relationship. This is because relationships are costly: We **invest** time in our friendships, **pay** attention to them, and **give** them our affection (Afifi et al., [2016](#)). As with any transaction, we must therefore weigh the costs and benefits of our relationships (Kelley & Thibaut, [1959](#); Homans, [1958](#)). As such, we seek out the relationships that will be most rewarding to us, while striving to minimize the demands placed on us by these relationships. In particular, we seek out friendships that will help us, provide us with social support, and make us happy (Apostolou et al., [2020](#)), while avoiding those that are too demanding of our time, unreliable, or uninteresting (Apostolou & Keramari, [2020](#)). Because of these costs and benefits, we have to make choices about who to socialize with. After all, time is a limited resource and we can only give it away to so many people (Takano & Ichinose, [2018](#); Miritello et al., [2013](#); Saramaki et al., [2014](#)). Similarly, getting to know someone else is cognitively demanding and making the wrong choices of who to trust can expose us to unnecessary risks (e.g., being taken advantage of, being rejected; McNamara et al., [2009](#); van Zalk et al., [2011](#)). For these reasons, we naturally seek out friends that are attractive to us and will enhance our sense of self, our status, or our security in the world (Eisenbruch & Roney, [2020](#); Christakis & Fowler, [2014](#); Brown & Brown, [2006](#)).

Multiple researchers over decades have conceptualized the processes underlying the formation of relationships: Taylor ([1968](#)) describes these processes as “social penetration” and Bergere

& Calabrese (1975) describe them as “uncertainty reduction.” No matter the terminology used or the particular details of the theory, the early stages of a relationship are characterized by a mutual exploration (Knoblock & Solomon, 2002) and later stages give way to the development of deeper, more emotional forms of intimacy. Through these stages, the formation and development of relationships is accomplished through interpersonal communication – often relying on certain “social scripts” to guide us through (Fehr & Harasymchuk, 2005; Acitelli et al., 2015; Homberg & MacKenzie, 2002). Following these social scripts makes us more predictable, putting others at ease and allowing them to enjoy themselves more. In fact, the link between communication satisfaction and uncertainty reduction has been experimentally demonstrated by Neuliep & Grohskopf (2009). Lacking these scripts, or the social skills to act them out, can therefore be a significant barrier to social connectedness (Persich et al., 2019; DiTommaso et al., 2003). Exemplifying this, Flora & Segrin (1999) showed that even among long-married couples, lack of social skills was associated with lesser relational satisfaction. Congruently, failure to reduce uncertainty is associated with lack of intimacy (Theiss & Solomon, 2008). “Getting to know” one another is thus an early task in relationship formation.

The challenge of “getting to know” someone may explain why decades of empirical research demonstrate that individuals tend to affiliate with people who are more similar to themselves (Burlinson et al., 2009). Indeed, shared lifestyles, common life-experiences, and even close geographic proximity (Puga-Conzalez et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2021; Stadtfeld & Pentland et al., 2015; Sadilek et al., 2012; Denissen et al., 2009; Wang & Chin, 2011; Reagans, 2010; Marmaros & Sacerdote, 2006) are observed to be key drivers underlying who we choose to befriend, the strength of these friendships, and how long these relationships last (McPherson et al., 2001; Currarini et al., 2007). The degree of similarity between individuals is referred to as “homophily”. Underscoring the importance of homophily in relationship formation, Dunbar (2013) reports that sharing a language, place of origin, education or career, sense of humor, hobby or interest, moral beliefs and world views, or even having the same music tastes strongly predict how emotionally close and altruistic we are with others. In fact, if two friends share any four of these traits, they are twice as emotionally close as those who share only two of these traits – indicating a surprising dose-response relationships between homophily (i.e., being similar to one another) and closeness.

However, others have argued that there are diminishing returns to homophily (Block & Grund, 2014) – suggesting that once common ground is established between friends additional similarities may be less important. Similarly, the question of how important unobservable characteristics (e.g., personality, cognitive ability) are in shaping relationships has been questioned (Branas-Garza et al., 2022) – suggesting again that observed patterns of homophily between friends may arise because shared characteristics act as a signal, but not necessarily a pre-requisite, for the possibility of a satisfying friendship between two individuals (Lieberman & Shaw, 2019). Supporting the theory that similarity is used as a social signal, Sun & Taylor (2020) demonstrate that in online environments, the signaling of shared characteristics encourages friendship formation. Yet, shared characteristics are found to not only be predictive of relationship formation, but also the quality or depth of relationships (Verbrugge et al., 1977) – suggesting that there may be some natural synergy for relationships where individuals are more similar. As one potential explanation for this, researchers have argued that homophily may lower the risks and barriers to connection and provide shortcuts for social trust (Hampton et al., 2018). Perhaps by socializing with those who are more similar to us, we can better take their perspective, understand their motives, and relate to them – thereby facilitating the

development of social trust and intimacy (Toch & Levi, [2012](#)). It is also natural to assume that individuals with more shared identity and experience will better be equipped to adhere to the norms and expectations that we hold for our friends (Arifovic & Danese, [2018](#)).

In summary, finding common ground (e.g., shared identity, shared interests, shared values, shared lifestyles) appears to be a key ingredient for how we select who we befriend and invest our social time in. By looking for and emphasizing our similarities with others, we can improve the formation potential for a relationship.

Relationship Development

After two individuals have formed a bond, the relationship develops and deepens over time as individuals transition from being acquaintance to friends to close friends and ultimately to best friends (Sias & Cahill, [2009](#)). Hall ([2018](#)) observed that, on average, it takes 112 hours to make a “friend,” 223 hours to make a “good friend,” and 737 hours to make a “best friend.” However, one cannot take these timescales for granted. Because friendships are often voluntary and situation-dependent associations (Seyfarth & Cheney, [2012](#)), the costs of dissolving a friendship is relatively low – especially in early days (Roberts & Dunbar, [2011](#); Hidd et al., [2023](#); Roy et al., [2022](#)). As such, if they are to develop their acquaintanceships into friendships, individuals must deepen their relationships and build intimacy.

To facilitate the development of intimacy, people must skillfully engage in self-disclosure, which is the act of revealing personal information about oneself to others (David, [1976](#)). Self-disclosure can include sharing thoughts, feelings, experiences, values, goals, and other facets of one's life. As such, self-disclosure creates a sense of vulnerability and trust – the foundations of intimacy (Weber & Carter, [1998](#)). Supporting this strategy for developing intimacy, a wide variety of studies demonstrate that increased self-disclosure is correlated with increased closeness between individuals (Bunch et al., [2008](#); Sprecher et al., [2012](#)) – for both same and cross-sex relationships of both men and women (Bowman, [2009](#)).

However, research suggests that disclosure is most effective when it is reciprocal. In fact, studies suggest that one-sided, high-levels of disclosure have a detrimental effect on relationships, suggesting the need for mutual and moderated exchange (Cozby et al., [1972](#); Hosman & Tardy, [2009](#)) and for the level of disclosure to match the level of intimacy and stage of relationship development (Won-Doornink, [1985](#); Sias & Cahill, [2009](#); Hays, [1984](#)). In this way, the mutually responsive give-and-take nature of relationships is key to supporting the development of healthy relationships (Reis [2012](#); Vaquera & Kao, [2008](#); Clark & Ayers, [1988](#); Peretti & Venton, [1984](#)).

Curiously, however, not all aspects of a relationship need be perfectly reciprocal. In fact, multiple studies suggest that there are benefits in providing more support than you receive – focusing on others more than on yourself (Hesse et al., [2020](#); Thomas, [2010](#); Fyrand, [2010](#); Schwartz et al., [2003](#); Nikitin & Freund, [2021](#)). However, being on the receiving end of such disproportionate support is observed to be harmful, suggesting that striving for reciprocity is the optimal strategy for both sides of the relationship (Buunk & Prins, [2005](#)). Furthermore, when one does receive support, there is emerging evidence to suggest that expressions of gratitude are particularly beneficial for individuals and their friends (Watkins, [2013](#); Boggis et al., [2020](#); Komase et al., [2021](#)).

In addition to self-disclosure and reciprocity, intimacy and closeness also emerge from intimate behaviours. For example, social touching has been documented as an important component of intimacy (Suvilehto et al., [2019](#)). In fact, direct neurobiological processes are believed to underlie the relationship between social touch, reduced stress, lower loneliness, and general well-being (Jakubiak & Feeney, [2016](#); Field [2010](#); Tejada et al., [2020](#); Ellingsen et al., [2013](#); Seger et al., [2014](#); Brown et al., [2021](#)). This suggests that touch itself is not only an expression of intimacy but can be used to foster closeness – provided, of course, that such touch is welcomed and appropriate (Suvilehto et al., [2015](#)). Similarly, Gearhart and Bodie ([2011](#)) show that active empathetic listening is an important general social skill and studies have suggested that the interactive components of conversations are important for shaping relationship satisfaction (Weger et al., [2014](#)). Similarly, affectionate communication is suggested to be associated with positive individual and relational outcomes (Hesse et al., [2020](#)).

Finally, shared experiences and memories are also observed to be importance to the development of interpersonal closeness (Bradshaw & Muldoon, [2019](#); Matteucci et al., [2019](#)). Exemplifying this, Min et al. ([2017](#)) showed that extraordinary experiences fostered closeness between individuals – particularly those who had just met for the first time. Similarly, in the context of long-term relationships Aron et al ([2000](#)) and others have shown that novel and arousing activities increase couples relationship quality (Girme et al, [2013](#)). Of course, these novel activities are also observed to require more social energy expenditure – suggesting that stability in routine is also an important predictor of relationship quality (Hall et al., [2021](#)).

In summary, developing close social bonds is facilitated by (a) self-disclosure and vulnerability, (b) reciprocity and responsiveness, (c) intimate behaviours, including conversation and social touch, and (d) through the creation of shared memories and experiences.

Relationship Maintenance

As with romantic relationships, our established friendships require continuous investments of time and effort. In their research exploring strategies for fostering and maintain close relationships, Hess et al. ([2007](#)) identified three elements of particular importance: being open (e.g., sharing personal information), being attentive (e.g., listening and respecting), and being engaged (e.g., spending time with and focusing on). Even prior to this work, these elements have garnered strong empirical support over several decades. For example, one study by Oswald & Clark ([2003](#)) explored the maintenance of best friendships during the transition from high school to college and revealed that among the most important predictors of continued closeness was engaging in ongoing investments through frequent communication. Similar findings are replicated in other studies (Roberts & Dunbar, [2015](#)) highlighting relational investment as key to preventing decay.

At the heart of relationship maintenance processes is whether we are fulfilling the expectations that our friends have for us. Indeed, high expectations ensure that our relationships continue to be beneficial to us and help to minimize harms that might otherwise emerge from poor quality relationships (MacEvoy et al., [2016](#)). The importance of relational expectations to relationship maintenance is now well established, with a growing literature base modelling relationship maintenance as a function of (a) how satisfied individuals are with their relationships, (b) whether there are better alternatives for relationships, and (c) how much one has already invested into a given relationship (Le & Agnew, [2003](#); Rhatigan & Axsom, [2006](#); Impett et al.,

[2002](#); Sprecher & Regan, [2002](#)). In other words, the same cost-benefit analyses that occur as relationships form continue throughout the life of a relationship (Fletcher & Simpson, [2000](#)).

While individuals inevitably vary with respect to what they expect from their friends, generally speaking, we are interested in maintaining relationships those who most closely match our ideals (Huang et al., [2019](#)). These ideals broadly emphasize investments in individuals who are trustworthy, supportive, cooperative, and communal (Cottrell & Neuberg, [2007](#)). Among many potential taxonomies, Argyle & Henderson ([1984](#)) identified several important expectations – which they describe as the “Rules of Friendship.” Among 43 such “rules” they identified, six stood out, highlighting the importance of (1) standing up for each other, (2) sharing in one another’s successes, (3) giving and receiving emotional support, (4) confiding and trusting in one another, (5) helping in times of need, and (6) striving to make each other happy. In other words, people want friends who actively invest and value their relationships. Similarly, Hall et al. ([2012](#)) characterized ideal friendship standards with six themes: (1) symmetrical reciprocity, (2) agency, (3) enjoyment, (4) instrumental aid, (5) similarity, and (6) communion. Both these lists highlight the breadth of ongoing expectations we have for our friends and the importance of continually investing and tending to our relationships.

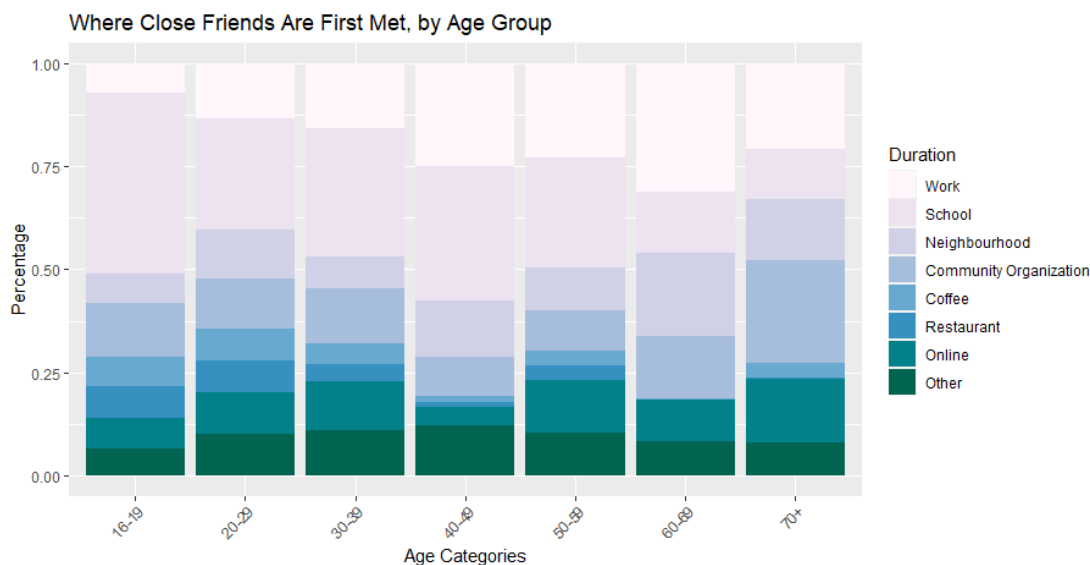
In summary, maintaining close relationships involves continuous investment marked by openness, attentiveness, and engagement, with the quality of these relationships hinging on meeting mutual expectations and ongoing investments in one’s relationships.

Case Study: Building Social Capital to Facilitate Close Social Relationships

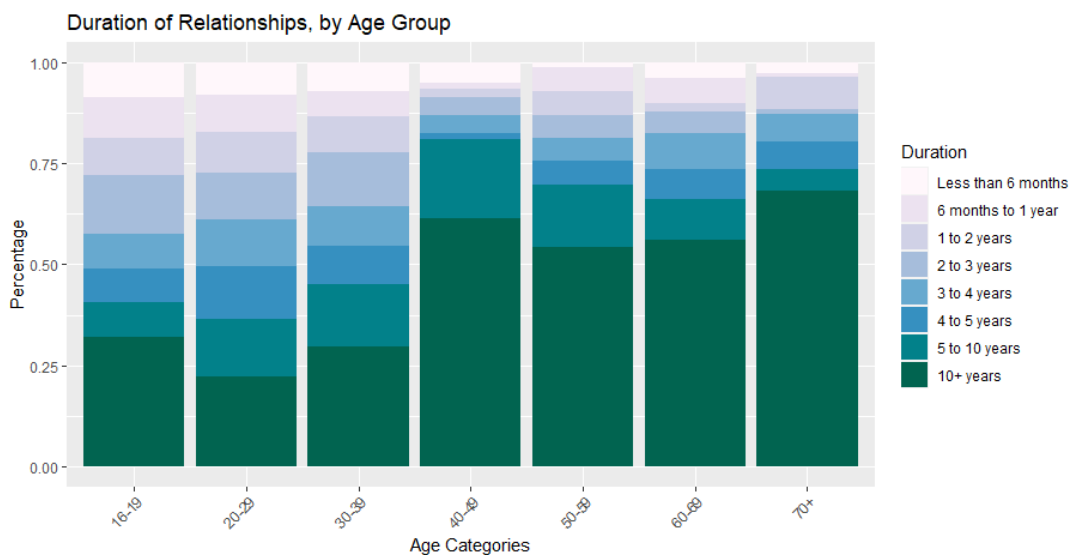
The *KidsFirst* program (Shan et al., [2014](#)), initiated by the provincial government in Saskatchewan, Canada, was implemented in nine communities with pronounced needs. The vision of this initiative is to provide a nurturing start for vulnerable children backed by supportive families and communities. To bring this vision to life, each of the nine sites established a program management committee, consisting of senior representatives from various sectors including health, education, social services, and Aboriginal/Métis organizations. These committees, in partnership with designated community partners such as health regions or school boards, appointed program managers responsible for identifying community needs, forming partnerships, and integrating services such as home visitation, mental health counseling, and early learning. Home visitation stands as the program's cornerstone, with local individuals, many of whom share life experiences with the program's beneficiaries, extending hands-on support to the families. They are trained by the Provincial Early Childhood Development Unit (ECDU) to meet basic family needs, impart prenatal and parenting wisdom, and connect them to valuable community resources. *KidsFirst* primarily serves parents of children from prenatal to age five, identifying potential participants through hospital screenings or referrals. A unique facet of this program is its emphasis on supporting Aboriginal families, acknowledging the distinct challenges they face due to historical injustices such as colonialism and the detrimental impact of the residential school system. Through its structure and execution, the *KidsFirst* program underscores the importance of multi-component, multi-level interventions. By integrating services, collaborating across sectors, and addressing diverse community needs, it paves the way for initiating, fostering, and sustaining healthy social relationships, underscoring that holistic approaches are paramount in ensuring long-lasting positive outcomes in community health initiatives.

Analyses from the Canadian Social Connection Survey

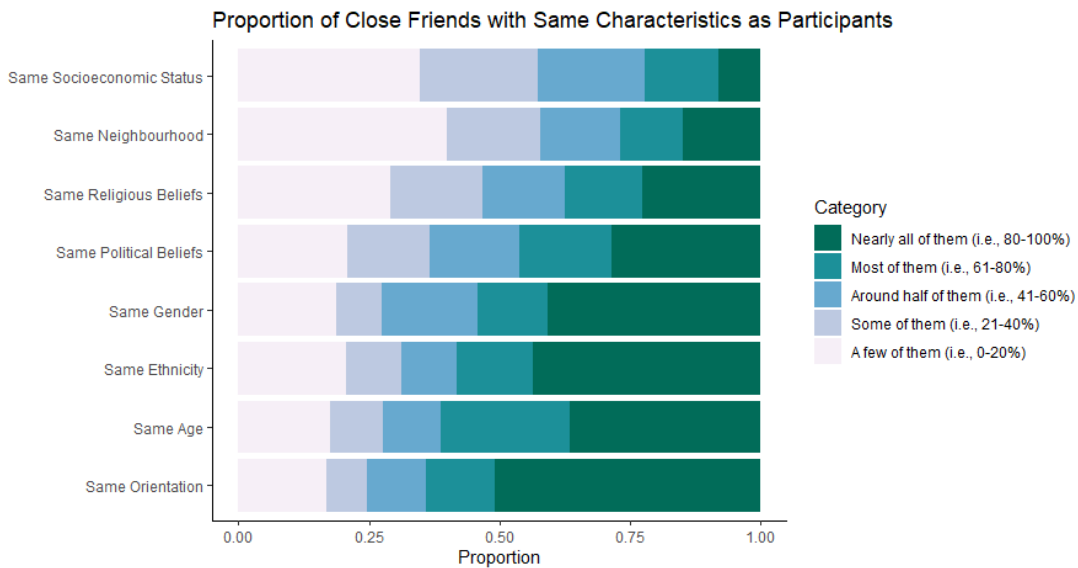
Using data from the Canadian Social Connection Survey, we first examined where participants met their close friends (n = 2568) and how long they had known their friends (n = 1920). Each analysis was stratified by age group. These results demonstrated that work and school – places where people frequently encounter the same individuals on a repeated basis – were common meeting places.



As well, we observed that among older people their propensity for having shorter duration friendships declined, compared to younger individuals.



Next, we examined the homophily of characteristics across individuals (n = 440), highlighting the extent to which individuals share common traits with their close friends, but also the broad levels of diversity within people’s close friendships on any given trait.



Finally, we explored the importance of self-reported qualities that might be relevant to one’s performance as a friend. The statements were based on those reported by Hall et al. (2012) but were reframed for self-assessment. Repeating the same factor structure of Hall’s earlier work, we constructed six subscales measuring (1) symmetrical reciprocity (e.g., “I really listen to what others have to say.”, “I will stand by those I know through anything”), (2) agency (e.g., “I have business connections,” “I am physically attractive”, “I am athletic”), (3) enjoyment (e.g., “I am an enjoyable person to be around”), (4) instrumental aid (e.g., “I help others complete their jobs and tasks”), (5) similarity (e.g., “I share common interest and beliefs with those I know”), and (6) communion (e.g., “I am someone whom others can share their secrets with”). Next, we used dominance analysis to assess which of these factors were most important in shaping emotional loneliness, social loneliness, and number of close friendships participants reported.

Results indicated that across each outcome, enjoyment – or the extent to which individuals rated themselves as someone who is fun and enjoyable to spend time with – was the most important predictor of each outcome. Agency – or the extent to which the participants self-reported characteristics were attractive and potentially useful to friends – was seen as important, particularly in predicting both the number of close friends and social loneliness. Symmetrical reciprocity was seen as an important predictor of emotional loneliness. Similarity was important in predicting number of close friends, but not so much for levels of emotional and social loneliness.

Table 1. Standardized General Dominance

| | Emotional Loneliness | Social Loneliness | Number of close friends |
|-------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| Communion | 0.131 | 0.010 | 0.053 |
| Similarity | 0.016 | 0.086 | 0.207 |
| Instrumental Aid | 0.073 | 0.061 | 0.039 |
| Enjoyment | 0.369 | 0.447 | 0.392 |
| Agency | 0.181 | 0.388 | 0.272 |
| Symmetrical Reciprocity | 0.229 | 0.009 | 0.036 |

Discussion

The evidence summarized above highlights important principals of and strategies for the initiation, formation, development, and maintenance of close social bonds. In summary, the initiation of relationships is often dependent on social contact – often through repeated exposure to individuals over time or through social networking. Of course, in order for these social contacts to mature to friendships, individuals must overcome barriers to social connection – such as lack of trust and the perceived costs of a given relationship. While navigating these barriers can be difficult, individuals rely on a variety of heuristic signals to choose how to invest their social time, including their similarity to others (e.g., shared identity, experience, interests, and values). After the initial stage of relationship formation, individuals must continue to invest in their relationships, develop intimacy, and increase the predictability of their partners. Among several strategies for deepening relationships, reciprocal self-disclosure and creating shared positive experiences emerge from the literature as critically important. Taken all together, the evidence reviewed highlights the importance of social skill development and positivity in being key tools for developing close social bonds and that these factors may outweigh the potential network or geographic effects as important determinants of inclusion and social wellbeing.

Of course, while individuals are ultimately personally responsible for the development of close social relationships, community-level investments that help individuals find opportunities for social contact and develop skills necessary for initiating, forming, deepening, and maintaining relationships are essential to supporting the emergence of strong, cohesive social networks (Zagac et al., [2022](#)).

Conclusion

Based on the evidence summarized above, individuals should be encouraged to (a) actively participate in activities that increase their contact with others in their community, (b) seek out common ground with new acquaintances, (c) deepen their relationships by building social trust and intimacy through self-disclosure and shared experiences, and (d) maintain relationships by ongoing and reciprocal investments in one's relationships. Furthermore, communities and institutions should prioritize creating spaces and events that encourage regular social interactions, offer programs that teach relationship-building skills, and advocate for the importance of mutual trust and understanding. Such actions are likely to support individuals as they seek to initiate, form, deepen, and maintain close social bonds.

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