

# Friendship on the Frontline

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When the eighty-year-long Harvard Study of Adult Development concluded, researchers in this landmark health project arrived at a dramatic conclusion. The key to happiness and longevity, they found, wasn't wealth, IQ, social class, or good genes – [it was having strong relationships](#). This is both good and bad news for us today. Good, because wellbeing is available to us all, whatever our background. Bad, because many of us are struggling to enjoy the benefits friendship brings.

## The friendship recession

YouGov studies in [2019](#) and [2021](#) found that around 20% of Brits have no close friends, including 7% who have no friends at all. Just 12% of us have one close friend, and 51% of us admit we struggle to make new ones.

Such friendlessness figures are compounded by a steady stream of loneliness reports. According to the 2020–21 [Community Life Survey](#), 6% of British adults are 'always' or 'often' lonely (that's over 3 million people), and another 18% are 'sometimes' lonely.

All this adds up to what some in the US have called a '[friendship recession](#)', in what author Noreena Hertz has labelled our '[lonely century](#)'. We've never needed friends more, yet never found them harder to find. The question is, why?

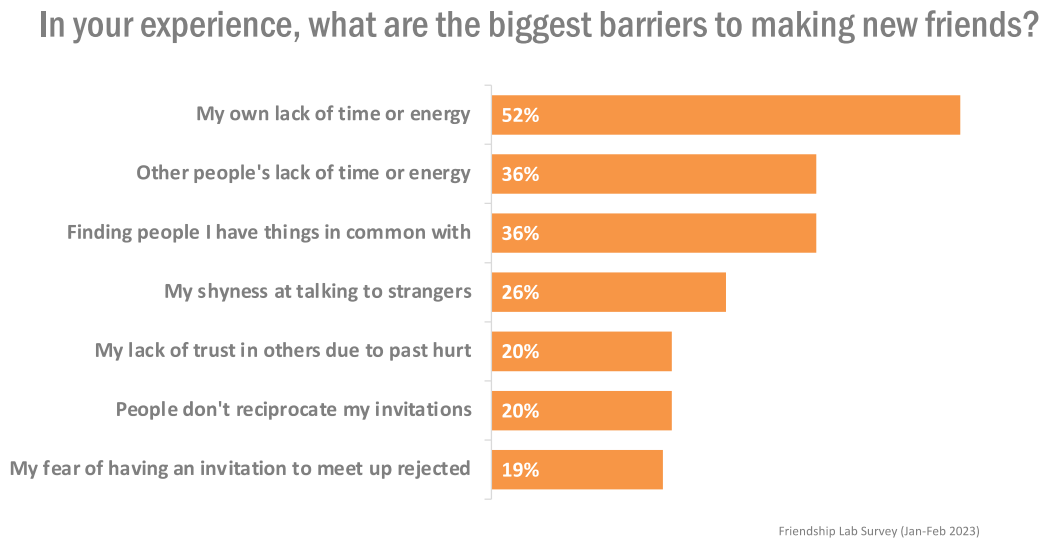
## The forces against friendship

The barriers to forming and maintaining friendship today are many. Long work hours, a lack of trust, rabid individualism, political polarisation, the isolating effects of smartphones and social media, and the decline of community institutions all play a role. I'll highlight four forces that are likely to be relevant to all of us.

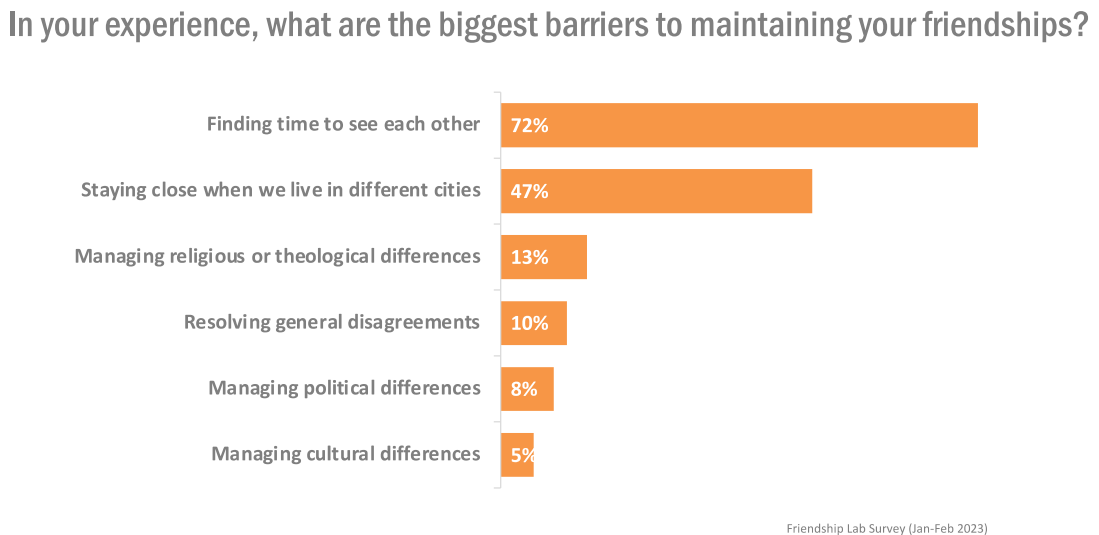
### *Force 1: busyness*

A lack of friends isn't always a matter of lacking social skills. In fact, in most surveys, that fails to show as a factor at all. Instead, the most common barrier cited is busyness. With long work days, lengthy commutes, and a myriad of activities to ferry children to, there can be little time left for friends. We found this in our Friendship Lab survey of around 1000 people, in which participants said the greatest challenge to both making and maintaining friends was their own and others' lack of time (Figures 1 and 2).

**Figure 1: Barriers to friendship**



**Figure 2: Barriers to maintaining friendship**



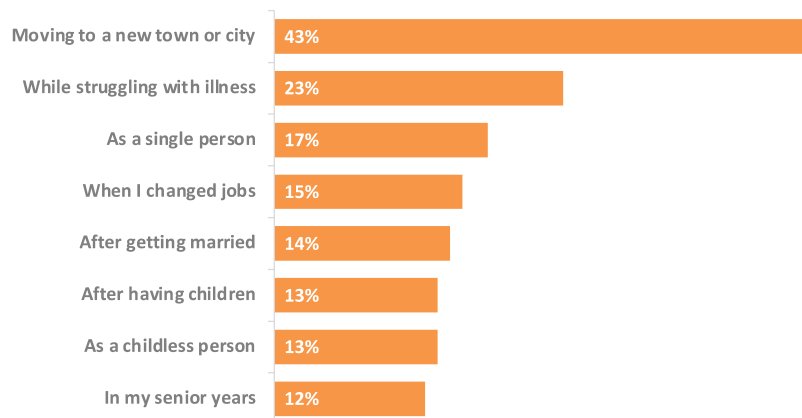
After work, family, and maybe church, there's often little time or energy left for anything else. When it takes [at least 50 hours](#) of socialising for an acquaintance to become a casual friend alone, a lack of time is a significant barrier to friend-making.

*Force 2: mobility*

Today we relocate for work opportunities or life-enhancing experiences – and this comes at a cost. In our Friendship Lab survey, respondents reported finding it hardest to make friends after relocating to another town or city (Figure 3), while staying close to distant friends was the second major barrier to maintaining existing friendships (Figure 2).

**Figure 3: Where hardest to make friends**

**When have you found it hardest to make new friends?**



Friendship Lab Survey (Jan-Feb 2023)

While video technologies allow us to maintain friendships across distance like never before, friendship cannot live by WhatsApp alone. We need physical beings with us in the A&E ward, real shoulders to cry on. In his book [Friendship](#), psychologist Robin Dunbar notes the '30-minute rule' – that we're more likely to stay in touch with people in a 30-minute radius from where we live. Constant relocation breaks this law.

*Force 3: post-pandemic workplace changes*

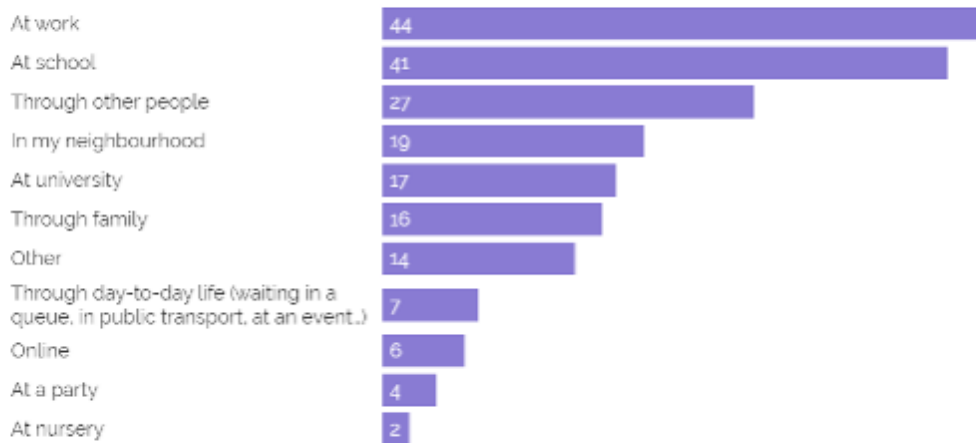
There's no doubt our social lives are still reeling from the Covid-19 pandemic. In the UK, [around a third of us](#) lost friendships during that surreal time, and [a recent Pew Research poll](#) found 35% of Americans now see socialising in-person and participating in large gatherings as less important.

We can't lay all the blame for our friendship recession on the pandemic, however. According to the American Time Use Survey, the number of hours Americans spend with friends started [declining back in 2014](#), dropping a massive 37% by 2019 alone. Westerners are spending more hours by ourselves than ever before, a trend one commentator linked to the fact that market penetration for smartphones crossed 50% in 2014.

One of the more practical changes brought about by the pandemic relates to the workplace, with remote work arrangements seemingly here to stay. The wellbeing effects of this are mixed. While working from home saves us commuting time (reducing force 1, busyness), it's now harder to make or maintain workplace friendships. This is significant as the workplace is now [the main place](#) we adults make friends (Figure 4).

### Work and education are the top places where Brits say they first met their close friends

Q5. Where did you meet your current close friends? Tick all the options where you met at least one of your close friends. (% of 1,980 GB adults with close friends)



YouGov

16 - 22 June 2021

#### Force 4: cultural and ecclesial neglect

Our last force is one of vacuum rather than pressure, because undergirding all that's been written above is the simple fact that friendship in our age has been ignored.

A quick look at our Spotify playlists will prove it, with any songs we find about friendship in them being mere drops in an ocean of love songs. We have sex education in schools, but little friendship education. We know the date of Valentine's Day, but not International Friendship Day. In popular culture, education, and (until recently) science, our gaze has been on eros rather than philia. This was illustrated recently with [the story of Jack and Zoe](#), whose 'romance' went viral after they met queuing to see the Queen lying in state. There was almost a country-wide sense of let down when it came to light that each already had partners and had only become friends.

We must face the fact too that friendship has been neglected in the church. As someone who has lived in five major cities across two countries, I thank God for the friend-making facility that is the local church. As one of the last remaining institutions to bring different people together, it has large- and small- group structures to enable connection, and with its emphasis on godliness (the fruit of the Spirit being the very virtues we need to make friendship work), it's been a lifeline to me and millions more. But our gaze has also been elsewhere. We've produced books, courses, and launched whole ministries around marriage

and parenting, but done next to nothing on friendship, something the Friendship Lab project will soon redress. When friendship has gotten a mention in churches, it's often in the context as a means to another end, like evangelism.

### **So, what is friendship?**

If the four forces weren't enough to blow friendship off course, there's also the confusion of language, for the word itself has been stretched to cover all manner of ill-fitting meanings. The internet is awash with sweet stories of 'friendships' between lonely grandmothers and toddlers, footballers and children in need, even divers and dolphins. Man's 'best friend' is a dog, outreach to vulnerable people is called 'befriending', while a Facebook 'friend' can be someone we met at a colleague's birthday party years ago and haven't seen since. None of this resembles true friendship.

So, what is friendship? Let's define the relationship and the personal qualities it entails.

### **The foundations of friendship**

Friendship is different to other relationships. Unlike marriage, no formal commitment binds it together. Unlike a business partnership, no legal contract defines its terms. Friendship is made and maintained on a voluntary basis. A workplace can't force friendships between colleagues, and churches can't force friendships between members (like cults do). Friends find something attractive in each other, preferring that person over others, and freely enter and stay in the relationship.

Friendship is also founded on equality. We mustn't confuse a mentor for being our friend, or a counsellor, or our boss, or any other patron-client relationship we have. Such people can become our friends, of course, but only when the patron steps out of that role, even momentarily, to join us as equals. In our lonely century, this is a common source of confusion. A grandmother isn't on an equal footing with a toddler, or an outreach worker with the person she serves.

And friendship is built on mutuality. I can be friendly towards you but unless you reciprocate, we won't have a friendship. This has been a stumbling point for Christians who've wanted to live out sacrificial agape love. Aren't we supposed to love others – even our enemies – even if they don't reciprocate? Yes, indeed. But that doesn't forbid enjoying mutual friendships too. If we subtly believe mutual friendship is indulgent or selfish, we'll focus only on reaching and serving others, not making friends.

### **The four qualities of a friend**

So, friendship is a voluntary, preferential relationship built on equality and mutuality. But as a practical definition, we can go further by describing not only the relationship, but the persons involved. At Friendship Lab, we work on a definition that I've taken from theorist [William K. Rawlins](#) and expanded:

'A friend is someone I can talk to, depend on, grow with, and enjoy.'

Each element here is important. A friend is someone we can *talk to* about the little things and the large, from football scores to our doubts, hopes, and fears. They're someone we can *depend on* to lend a hand when we move house, or be there at A&E when the accident happens. They help us *grow* into the people we're meant to be, committed to our welfare, including our spiritual and eternal wellbeing. And they're the ones we *enjoy* because of the laughter they bring, the insights they carry, or the sharp game of tennis they play, or just because their presence makes us smile.

This is what a friend is, and the kind of friend we can be to others.

*Sheridan Voysey is an Australian author, broadcaster, and founder of [FriendshipLab.org](http://FriendshipLab.org), now living in the United Kingdom. This is an edited version of a post that first appeared on the [London Institute for Contemporary Christianity website](#).*