

Your Social Network

Human beings are social by nature. We need social interaction to function at our best. As a result of our social nature, many of our most difficult stressful situations have to do with other people: misunderstandings between friends, conflicts with romantic partners, pressures from workmates, and social isolation. Positive social interactions, on the other hand, cushion us against stress. By building up our social support and using social skills and assertiveness to reduce interpersonal friction we can cut down on our total load of stress.

The quality of your relationships influences how you feel about yourself, how connected you feel to the world, how much fun you have, and whom you can call upon for different kinds of help.

When people become emotionally overwhelmed, their social lives are usually among the first areas to be affected. In depression, for example, social isolation is one of the primary symptoms. Unfortunately, isolation only makes the depression worse.

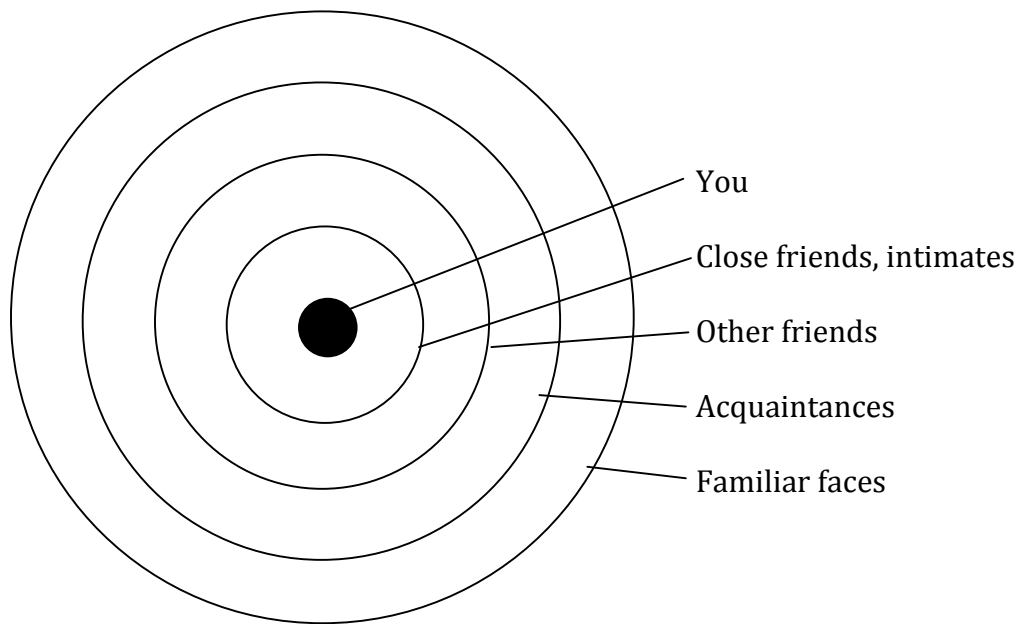
The Nature of the Network

Your social network is made up of all of the people you know. It includes family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, physicians and other professionals, and everyone else who has a place in your life. Some you barely know; others you know very well. Some you haven't spoken with in months; others you see regularly.

One of the most helpful ways to look at your social network is to consider it as a series of concentric circles, like the diagram on the next page.

In this diagram, you are in the middle. Each ring represents a different group of people. The closer a ring is to the middle, the deeper is the relationship those people have with you.

- **Close friends**, or intimates, are the people with whom you can discuss almost anything about your life. You are extremely open with them.
- **Other friends** are the people with whom you feel comfortable sharing *some* personal things, but perhaps not everything.
- **Acquaintances** are the people with whom you spend some time, but are not especially close to. You don't often discuss your personal life with them. Many neighbors and coworkers may fit into this category.
- **Familiar faces** are the people you recognize but with whom you seldom speak. They may be in a class you are taking, live in your building, or work at a shop you use.



Imagine that there are not one, but two sets of concentric circles to describe the people in your life:

1. Your *actual* social network. This includes the people who are in each of these groups in your life *right now*.
2. Your *ideal* social network. The number of people you would *like* to have in each group.

The big question is not whether the number of people in your life matches some set standard. There is no magic number of friends that you must have. Some people prefer more, others fewer. The best indication of whether you have a good social network is how closely what you have resembles what you would *like* to have. So the critical question is: How close is your *actual* social life (the way it is right now) to your *ideal* social life (the way you would like it to be)?

Your Social Census

Take some time to list the people in your social network right now. Include friends, family, partner, coworkers, and professionals (such as your physician). When you are done with each group, count up your list. Then think of how many people you would *like* to have in each group. We won't count your familiar faces here, as there may be too many of them and they seem to be less important than the inner three circles.

Close friends, intimates: List the people you can talk to about your deepest personal issues.

How many are there? _____ How many would you like to have? _____

Other friends: List the people you feel comfortable talking to about *some* personal matters.

How many are there? _____ How many would you like to have? _____

Acquaintances: List the people you spend at least some time with, but don't consider close personal friends.

How many are there in all? _____ How many would you like to have? _____

Some observations about the census...

- **Social life not ideal?** Welcome to the club. Most people can find fault with their social network. The most common complaint is that there are too few social contacts, especially in the “friends” and “close friends” categories. The goal is to bring your social life *closer* to what you want. It will probably never be perfect, and it doesn’t need to be.
- **Don’t want a network?** Your ideal social network should be based on what you want when things are going reasonably well. Many people find that during depression or bad times they don’t want to socialize. Your ideal social network at these times might be to have no one at all! Although this is normal, social isolation usually makes things worse. Try using gradual goal-setting to push yourself *gently* into being with other people. As your mood improves, you can expect that your interest and enjoyment in socializing will return.
- **Got some recent shrinkage?** You may notice that your social network has shrunk recently, especially if you have been going through mood difficulties or a major life transition. It can also shrink quite a lot if you move, change jobs, leave a relationship, retire, or give up alcohol or drugs. If this has happened to you, then building up your social life may be particularly important.
- **Shared experience helps.** It can help to have at least one person in your social network who has gone through crises and transitions similar to your own. You may be able to talk with that person about your experiences in a way that you never could with people who haven’t been there. If you don’t know anyone like this, a support group may be an option.
- **Shallowness can be fun.** We hear a lot about the importance of deep friendships. It can be easy to neglect the people with whom we just go swimming or see movies. These kinds of social contacts are important too. They get us out and involved and allow us to “lighten up” now and then without talking about deep issues incessantly.

Need to build your network?

Most of the people in your social census probably fell into your life one way or another without too much planning on your part. Perhaps you met one person at a class, two more through relatives, one at a job you once had, and so on. You didn’t plan to meet them. They just showed up somehow.

Having people drift into your life like this works – but it takes a lot of time. If your social network is too small, you may have to take a more active role in building it up. We are not used to saying “*Okay, I need to expand my social network. Here’s the strategy.*” But social support is too important to leave to chance. It must be a priority.