

# Intimate friend circles linked to increased happiness, studies show

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Having few friends may make you a flop on Facebook, but more isn't merrier when it comes to real life. At least, not for women.

Although the brain can effectively manage a network of 150, researchers say a small, devoted core of female friends — between two and four — appears to provide women with the greatest payoff in terms of stability, happiness and coping.

In fact, even in studies of baboons, primatologists find females who keep tight bonds with three same-sex companions are less prone to stress than those who cast a larger but shallower social net.

"In the western world, we mistake more money as better; bigger houses as better; more friends as better. But the research keeps calling us back to the fact that we should be going deep, not wide," says Harvard alumna Caroline Adams Miller, who specializes in positive psychology.

According to a recent University of Kansas study, women not only put more work into their friendships than men, they also expect more out of them — and are more disappointed when those expectations aren't met.

Add that to women's growing time deficit (Statistics Canada finds their participation in social activities has declined from 70 per cent to 62 per cent since 1998) and it's easy to see why an intimate friendship circle proves more efficient.

"Even if we don't call upon it, just knowing we have that invisible net of support makes us more resilient, allows us to get through difficult times, and navigate life more effectively," says Adams Miller, bestselling author of *Creating Your Best Life*.

"But it has to be the right kind of relationships. The question to ask is: 'Am I a better version of myself for spending time with these people?'"

When it comes to Colleen Kleven's two best friends, her answer is certainly yes. The Sudbury, Ont., woman says she can count on them at any hour, confide in them with complete trust, and knows they always have her best interests at heart — benefits that all but disappear in larger groups.

"Let's face it, when you get lots of women together, you end up doing your own version of *The View*," says Kleven, author of *The Beginner's Guide to Chick Night*. "It's not necessarily the type of gathering where you can bare your soul."

A seminal University of California-Los Angeles study found that when women "tend and befriend" one another, the resulting release of oxytocin provides a calming effect that helps buffer stress.

Primate studies further suggest that devoted contact with a small group is key: female baboons who fostered long-term ties to a trio of female companions live significantly longer than those with less stable social bonds.

"They maintain a couple of very strong relationships, with particular partners, rather than trying to forge weaker relationships with a large number of partners," says Joan Silk, professor of anthropology at UCLA. "They probably do have a lesson for us."

The learning curve isn't a big one. The Vanier Institute of the Family reports that Canadian women maintain an average of two or three "close personal relationships," while a 2009 Facebook study showed women with 120 friends on the site only regularly engage in two-way conversations with six of them.

Even religious groups are recognizing the power of small but committed networks. Edmonton's Terwillegar Community Church, for example, encourages members to form same-sex "triads" to keep one another spiritually on track.

"It's that dynamic of three that's unusually helpful," says Tiffany Lebenhagen, who's been part of a triad for two and a half years. "The friendship, intimacy and accountability you experience really seem to encourage individual growth."

Across both genders, a meta-analysis of more than 30 friendship studies shows we're all seeking the same primary traits in a friend: loyalty, commitment, trustworthiness and a genuine positive regard for us. But communication professor Jeffrey Hall, author of the University of Kansas study, notes that women's friendships tend to be more loyal and committed, and carry greater requirements of

self-disclosure and emotional sharing, than those maintained by men.

“Women expect more from their best friends than men do, no matter how many friends they’ve got,” says Hall.

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