

PSYCHOLOGY

Why You Miss Those Casual Friends So Much

by [Gillian Sandstrom](#) and [Ashley Whillans](#)

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The iPhone on the table buzzed. Ashley sighed. After three weeks of putting out fires while working through feelings of grief and stress, her first thought was, “Now what’s wrong?”

Except, this text message wasn’t from an anxious client or student. Instead, a casual acquaintance had written: “Ashley, how are you? I’ve been thinking about you and your partner in this Covid-19 environment. I hope you are both okay!” Ashley’s eyes welled up. She needed that check-in more than she realized. And, it was a nice surprise to hear from a colleague she hadn’t caught up with for a while.

Perhaps there is something to be learned from this out-of-the-blue text message from an acquaintance. Can quick, informal check-ins provide a means to satisfy our need for social connection without turning socializing into a chore during this emotionally exhausting time?

The Surprising Power of Weak Ties

A growing body of research suggests that there are surprisingly powerful benefits to connecting with casual acquaintances — relationships that sociologists call “weak ties.”

Gillian started studying weak ties after realizing how good it felt to be recognized by the owner of the hot dog stand that she passed on her way to campus each day, or to have Barry, the local pet store owner, ask about her cat by name. Her research finds that people are happier on days when they say “hi” to a colleague in the hallway or have a brief conversation with a neighbor at the grocery store. In another of Gillian’s studies, people who were asked to “personalize” a transaction at a coffee shop by smiling, making eye contact, and having a genuine social interaction with their barista, felt about 17% happier and more socially connected than those who were asked to be “efficient.”



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To be sure, our friends and family — our strong ties — support us when we’re feeling down and make us feel appreciated. But weak ties can do these things too: It’s not just in the movies that people get social support from their hairdresser. We feel seen when a server smiles upon seeing us and knows what our “usual” is. In fact, our interactions with weak ties tend to go *especially* smoothly, since we are

often on our best behavior with people we don’t know well. Weak-tie relationships give us short, low-cost, informal interactions, which often provide new information and social variety. As a result, we are often pleasantly surprised by these moments.

Weak Ties During Covid-19

In a normal day, people interact with somewhere between 11 and 16 weak ties on the way to work, while running errands, or on a break between meetings at the office.

Due to physical distancing, these once-common interactions have been eradicated, and we no longer have physical reminders that we are part of a wider social network. Forty-five states have issued some variation of a stay-at-home order. When we do venture out for essential supplies or to take a walk, we see faces that are half hidden behind masks, and we most definitely are not allowed to interact. In countries like Italy, you can face jail time for these once innocuous conversations.

Since weak-tie interactions aren’t happening spontaneously, we need to initiate them instead. However, we aren’t used to doing this, so it may feel a little awkward. In fact, even before Covid-19, it was not our natural inclination to reach out to weak ties. This is because we aren’t sure if the other person will be interested, and we worry that these

conversations will be uncomfortable. Luckily, these fears are unfounded. When people are assigned to talk to weak ties and strangers, these conversations are more enjoyable and go more smoothly than people predict.

So, how can we overcome our overblown fears and cultivate positive, informal interactions with weak ties? Here are five scientifically based strategies:

1. Use informal modes of communication

Phone calls can feel intrusive, and emails seem impersonal. Instead, try reaching out to a “weak tie” via text message or Facebook. This will allow the other person to respond whenever they can, so you don’t need to worry about reaching out at the wrong time.

2. Don’t expect a reply

Rejection rates when reaching out to a weak tie are extremely low — in one of Gillian’s studies fewer than 12% of people who talked to strangers experienced a rejection. However, during the pandemic, many people are feeling overwhelmed and some may not respond.

If you don’t get a response, don’t take it personally. Remind yourself that the point of reaching out to a weak tie is to let this person know that you are thinking about them. Reframe your expectations: Think about this interaction as smiling at a colleague in the hallway. You’re acknowledging and saying hello to the other person. Perhaps you’ll talk for a few minutes — but if you don’t that’s fine too.

Instead of expecting a reply, enjoy the knowledge that your message is likely to deliver a little hit of happiness, and maybe, like it did for Ashley, could make a real difference in someone's day.

3. Set an expectation for a short and simple conversation.

Your goal is to let the other person know you are thinking about them and open up the opportunity to chat, *if* they want to. It's okay to keep the conversation short: In recent data one of us collected, a "just right" conversation with a stranger was about 10 minutes long. If you set the expectation that you only have a few minutes, this lets you both off the hook, and helps you avoid the feeling that socializing is another endless "to-do."

4. Reach out to people who have affected you in the past.

Expressing gratitude is a powerful way to improve mood. If you had a colleague who inspired you, or a mentor who gave you excellent career advice, let them know you are thinking of them. Or you could reach out to someone you shared fun times but have lost touch with. You'll both enjoy the nostalgic flashback.

5. Share something personal about yourself.

If you aren't sure what to write about, share something personal about yourself — like a photo of your pet or child doing something cute and/or funny. Sharing aspects of yourself helps to build positive rapport and encourages the other person to reciprocate.

Draw on Weak-Tie Strategies with Strong Ties Too

Now that our social interactions are often limited to strong ties, and we schedule hour-long calls and board game nights to spend quality time together, we are at risk for becoming burned out. In data that we've collected post-Covid-19, we found that the more time that people spent interacting with colleagues and friends online, the more stressed out they felt.

As these data suggest, scheduled social interactions are exhausting. Also, they do not work for everyone. People in different time zones, with bad internet connection, who are juggling demanding care-giving and work responsibilities might not have time for formal means of connection that require advanced scheduling, like family or company-mandated happy hours.

We can repurpose the informality and spontaneity of weak-tie interactions to help us stay connected while reducing the risk of burnout. Right now, the best social interactions are those that tell others you are thinking of them, without an expectation of a return of time, energy, or attention.

If studying weak ties has taught us anything, it is that we need to practice self-compassion. We might not have the energy for 1.5 hour long social calls every day. That is perfectly alright.

The best research shows that even a few minutes of texting is enough to improve your mood and spread joy within your social network — perhaps more than that never-ending game of Pictionary.

We might be missing out on our weak tie interactions right now, but it is in our power to create them. An informal hello with a colleague — or your mother — is only a short text message away.

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Gillian Sandstrom is a senior lecturer in psychology at the University of Essex. Her current research focuses on how to make difficult conversations a little easier (e.g., talking about cancer, miscarriage, bereavement) and how to encourage people to talk to strangers.



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Jadey Gonzalez 8 hours ago

Thank you so much for writing this article. You put into words what I've been experiencing emotionally and mentally lately including little joys from simple, short text conversations and the sometimes wavering balance between social connection and quiet time/self-compassion.

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