

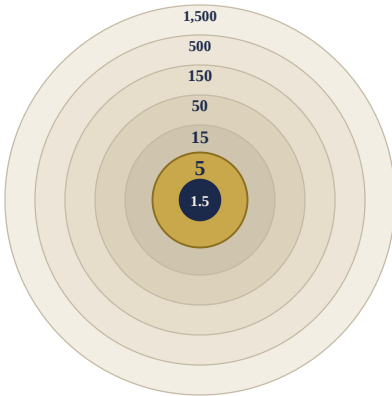
Who Are Your Five?

Robin Dunbar's circles of friendship, and why the inner ring is where retired men run short

The question is not "do you have friends?" The question is "**who are your five?**" For most retired men the honest answer is two, and one of them is his wife. That is where the crisis lives. Your 150 is fine. Your five is where we are working.

The circles: your social world has rings

Robin Dunbar, an Oxford anthropologist, spent some thirty years comparing primate brain size with social group size. His finding: a human being can hold about **150 stable relationships**. Inside that are nested layers, each roughly three times the one inside it. Every layer has a price, paid in time: contact below the rate shown and a friendship slips out to the next ring.



RING	WHO	KEEP-ALIVE RATE
1.5	Intimate partner. For most married men, his wife.	Daily
5	Your support clique: who you call at 2 a.m.	Weekly
15	Close friends; who you'd grieve deeply	Monthly
50	Good friends; your party list	Twice a year
150	Friends; your wedding or funeral list	Yearly
500	Acquaintances	—
1,500	Faces you can put a name to	—

Each ring includes the ones inside it: your 15 contains your 5.

The 1.5 is not the 5

Dunbar finds an innermost layer of about one and a half, the intimate. For most married men that is his wife. Which means the five is not her.
The five is the men.

Where the time goes

About 40% of our social effort goes to the five and another 20% to the next ten: 60% to the fifteen who matter most. The retired man's problem is not too little time. The hours drift to the 150 while the five runs on empty.

The 150 shows up wherever people organize without an org chart: Neolithic villages, the Roman army's century, Hutterite colonies that split when they pass 150, and the congregation size at which a pastor stops knowing everyone by name.

Four findings every man should know

Friendship decays; kinship doesn't.

A friendship left unfed slips a ring within months. A brother survives the same neglect. Friends need tending; family mostly waits.

Men bond shoulder to shoulder.

Women's friendships tend to run on conversation; men's run on doing things together. That is why your triad needs an activity, not just a meeting.

Seven pillars predict a durable bond.

Shared language, place, education, interests, worldview, humor and moral values. The more you share, the stronger the tie. Use them to break a tie, not as a filter.

Five is a capacity, not a wish list.

You cannot have twelve men in your five. Choosing who fills it is not cold. It is wisdom.

"Lovers are normally face to face, absorbed in each other; Friends, side by side, absorbed in some common interest."

C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (1960)

The cold math

For some men friendship takes care of itself: the golf group, the cigar night, the friends who never moved away. For most men it does not. These numbers are for them.

MEN AND FRIENDSHIP, BY THE NUMBERS

15%

of American men report no close friends, up from 3% in 1990.

40% → 15%

men with ten or more close friends, 1990 to 2021.

1 in 5

men got emotional support from a friend in the past week.

200 hours

together, roughly, to turn an acquaintance into a close friend.

15 cigarettes

a day: the health risk of loneliness, by one widely cited comparison.

+50%

better odds of survival for people with strong social ties (148 studies).

The Harvard Study of Adult Development, now past 85 years: the men most satisfied in their relationships at 50 were the healthiest at 80. Most of you are between those ages.

Do the arithmetic. A triad that meets ninety minutes a month and does one ordinary thing together in between reaches 200 hours in under two years. The structure is the whole difference. This is a design problem, not a character problem. The structures that used to produce friendship (the job, the kids' teams, the neighborhood) disappeared, and nobody handed you new blueprints.

The Recipe: a maintenance schedule for your five

A monthly triad meeting, by itself, keeps a man in your fifteen. What makes him a five is what happens *between* meetings.

Every week	One personal touch for each man in your five: a text, a call, a porch visit (not a group text). Plus one shoulder-to-shoulder hour with at least one of them.
Every month	Your triad meets. One invitation goes out to a man in your fifteen.
Every quarter	Host one thing: six to twelve men, wives if it fits. This is how a fifteen becomes a fifty, and a fifty yields your next five.
Every year	Reread your five. Redraw your circle. Go one rung deeper with one man.

Hours are the currency. Weekly keeps a five. The calendar, not the feeling, decides. Too much? You take a pill every morning for a heart you cannot see. This is ten minutes a week for the men you can.

What turns three friends into a "we"

Three friendships are not yet a group. Dunbar's research finds that a few shared acts release the endorphins that bond a group: **eat together, laugh together, pray or sing together, tell the same stories, and keep a ritual.** The meal and the closing prayer are the mechanism, not decoration. Break bread at every meeting.

Your turn: who are your five?

Current reality, not wishful thinking. Few names is normal; the ring is what we are filling.

NAME	WHAT'S MISSING?
1. _____	_____
2. _____	_____
3. _____	_____
4. _____	_____
5. _____	_____

Three names from the cohort, two from beyond the room (a drifted friend, a neighbor, someone who was once a fifteen). For each, name the missing practice: proximity, activity, initiative, vulnerability, or a container.

"Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken."
Ecclesiastes 4:12

Sources. Robin Dunbar, *Friends: Understanding the Power of Our Most Important Relationships* (2021); Sam Roberts & Robin Dunbar, "Communication in social networks: Effects of kinship, network size, and emotional closeness," *Personal Relationships* (2011); Dunbar, "Breaking Bread: the Functions of Social Eating," *Adaptive Human Behavior and Physiology* (2017); Daniel Cox, *The State of American Friendship*, American Perspectives Survey, Survey Center on American Life (2021); Jeffrey Hall, "How many hours does it take to make a friend?" *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* (2019); Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Timothy Smith & J. Bradley Layton, "Social Relationships and Mortality Risk," *PLoS Medicine* (2010); U.S. Surgeon General, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation* (2023); Robert Waldinger & Marc Schulz, *The Good Life* (2023); C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (1960).