

The Mental State of the World in 2022

Friendships and Mental Wellbeing

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What about the bonds of friendship? Like family relationships, friendships form an essential bedrock to our adult lives as well as providing a supportive social buffer during times of adversity, and studies have shown a link between friendship and mental health outcomes. Are friendships too deteriorating? Here we explore the nature of friendship across generations and geographies and reveal a decline in the percentage of people with friends to confide in and rely on with increasingly younger generations across the global Internet-enabled world. We also show that the nature of people's home life growing up, and the relationship they have with their family as an adult, influence the number and quality of their friendships. Finally, we show that close family relationships and friendships have an additive impact on mental wellbeing.

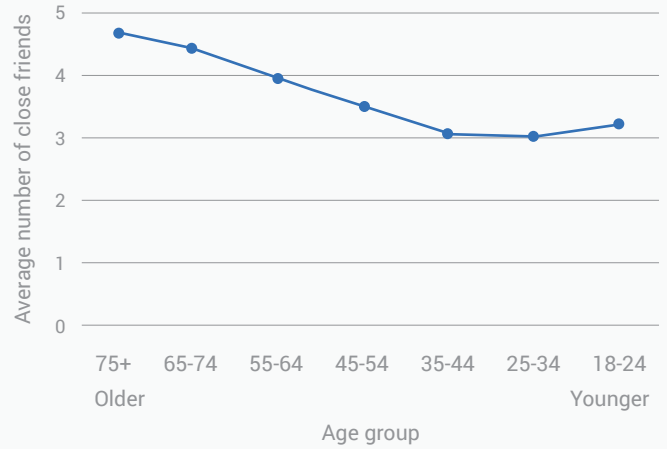
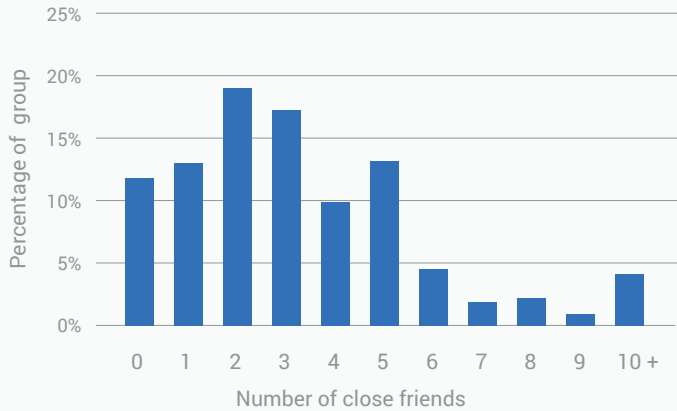
The demographics of friendships

Across the global population in 2022 most people indicated having between 1 and 5 close friends with a global average of 3.5. 12% reported having no friends while an equivalent percentage have 7 or more close friends (Figure 4.1 left). Across age groups the average number of friends decreased with younger generations, flattening out after age 45 (Figure 4.1 right). The generation aged 75+ reported 4.7 close friends on average while those under 45 reported an average of 3 to 3.2 friends. Twice as many 18-24 year olds (12%) reported having no close friends compared 75+ year olds (6%) (Figure 4.2 right)

On average people have between 3 and 4 close friends while 12% have no close friends at all.

Figure 4.1: The Demographics of Friendships

The majority of the population has between 1 and 5 close friends while 12% have no close friends (left) while adults older than 45 have increasingly more close friends (right). The average number of close friends across the population is 3.5.

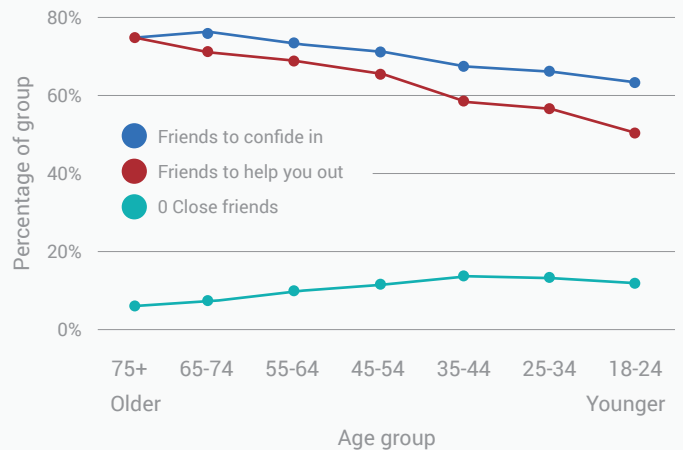
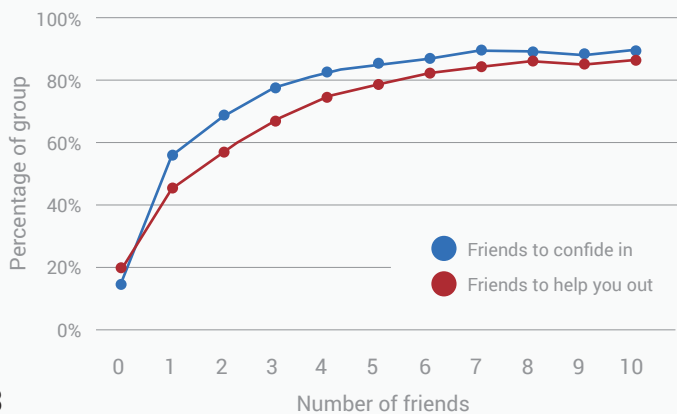


The quality of friendships

Close friends can mean different things. To understand the support offered by close friendships, we also asked people whether they had friends who they could confide in, or who would help them out in practical ways during times of need. The more close friends you have, the more likely you are that some of them are ones you can confide in or will help you out (Figure 4.2 left). Furthermore, 75% of 75+ year olds said they had friends they could confide in and help them out. This declined with each younger generation such that only 64% of 18-24 year olds had friends that they could confide in, and only 51% had friends who would help them out, an even sharper decline (Figure 4.2 right). This despite 18-24 year olds reporting slightly more close friends on average than the next two older generations.

Figure 4.2: The changing quality of friendships

The probability of having a friend you could confide in or one who would help you out practically in a time of need increased steeply as the number of reported close friends increased from 0 to 5 (left). The percentage having friends to confide in and help them out decreased with each younger age group. This was despite all adult age groups younger than 45 having an equivalent average number of close friends.



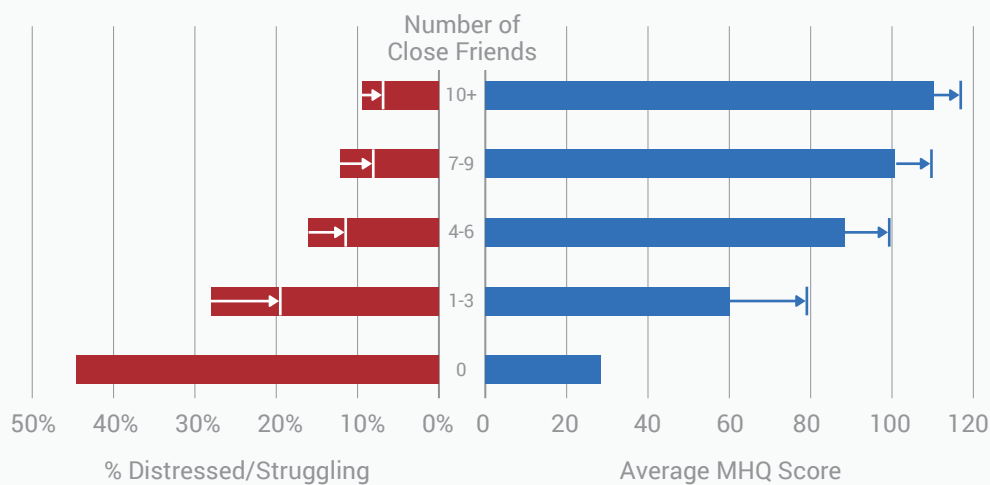
Across the generations there is a decline in the proportion of people reporting that they had friends who they could confide in or who would help them out.

Friendships and mental wellbeing

How does the number of close friends impact mental wellbeing? MHQ scores increased as number of close friends increased, plateauing slightly at higher numbers (Figure 4.3 right bars). MHQ scores were lowest for those who reported no close friends, with an average of 28, a score in the “Enduring” range, increasing to an average of 110, in the “Succeeding” range for those with 10+ close friends. Conversely, among those who reported having no close friends, 45% reported struggling with their mental health, four times greater than people with 10+ friends (9.5%; Figure 4.3 left bars). Even having 4-6 close friends was associated with a 60-point increase in MHQ score and a 3-fold reduction in people with mental health struggles compared to having no close friends. This substantial difference in MHQ score, and multi-fold difference in the proportion of people struggling was consistent across all age groups, highlighting the importance of close friendship on mental health.

Figure 4.3: Relationship between friendship and mental wellbeing

The average MHQ score of those having 10+ close friends was 110 with ~9% Distressed or Struggling. In contrast the average MHQ score of those with no close friends was 28 with 44% Distressed or Struggling, a 4.5-fold increase. MHQ scores went up and % Distressed or Struggling decreased when those friendships included someone to confide in and rely on to help you out (shown by vertical bars).



For each number of friends, when specifically considering those who also reported friends they could confide in and rely on to help them out in times of need, MHQ scores were higher and the percentage

Distressed or Struggling lower than when considering only number of friends alone. This difference is shown by the arrows in Figure 4.3.

The percentage of people Distressed or Struggling with their mental wellbeing is over 3.5 times higher in those who report having no friends compared to those with many close friends they can confide in and rely on.

A geographic view of friendship trends

Where do people have the greatest number of friends? And in which regions around the globe are people more likely to have friends who will help them out or who they can confide in?

Most regions of the world had between 3 and 3.5 friends per person on average. However, South East Asia and the Spanish-speaking world stood out with 4.7 and 4.3 friends on average, respectively. South East Asia also had the highest percentage of people who reported having friends that they can confide in (74%). Sub-Saharan Africa has the lowest average number of close friends, but has the second highest percentage of people who report having friends that they can confide in (72%), and the second highest percentage of people who report having friends who will help them out during times of need (65%).

Conversely, it's Portuguese speakers who report the lowest number of close friends (2.8), and the lowest likelihood of having friends who would help them out (54%) and who they can confide in (66%). The Core Anglosphere also reports a similarly low proportion of people who have friends that they can confide in (66%).

While these numbers are not shown here graphically they are available in the associated tables.

South East Asia and the Spanish-speaking world have the highest number of close friends on average while Sub Saharan Africa has the highest proportion of friends to confide in and rely on for help.

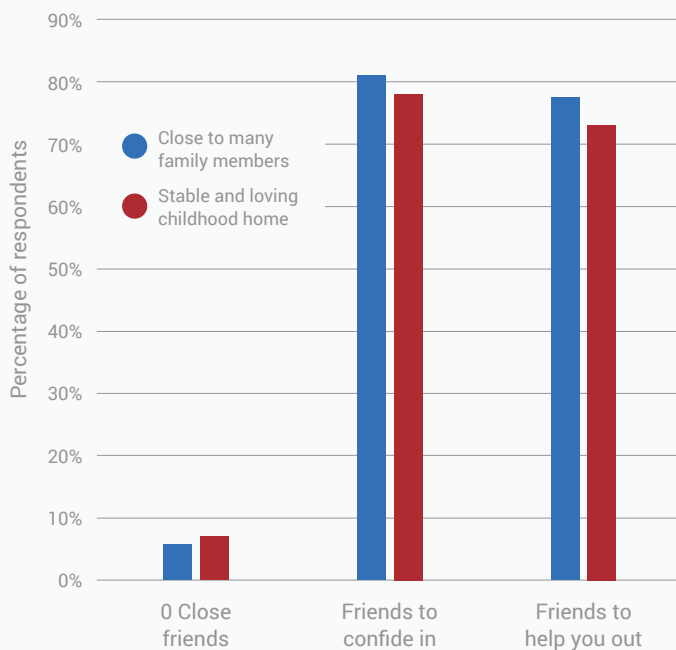
The impact of family relationships on friendships

Family relationships are typically the first relationships we experience. How does the nature of your childhood home or the relationship you have with your adult family impact the number of close friends you have or the quality of those friendships?

First, those who reported being close to many family members have 4.6 close friends on average compared to an average of 2.6 among those who reported that they don't get along with their family. In addition, those who grew up in loving stable homes have more close friends as adults (average 4.3) compared to those who grew up in emotionally distant and unstable home (average 2.9).

Figure 4.4: Strong family relationships mean better friendships

Of those who were close to many of their family members and/or grew up in stable and loving homes 78-81% had one or more close friends to confide in and 75-78% had one or more close friends who they could rely on to help them out when they needed it. Only 6-7% had no close friends.



Moreover, among those who were close to their families only 6% reported having no close friends, while 81% reported friends they could confide in, and 77% reported friends they could rely on to help them in times of need (Figure 4.4). In contrast, more than 3 times as many people who reported not getting on with their family at all reported having no close friends (19%, not shown in Figure).

Only 6% of those who were close to their families had no close friends compared to 19% of those who did not get along with their family.

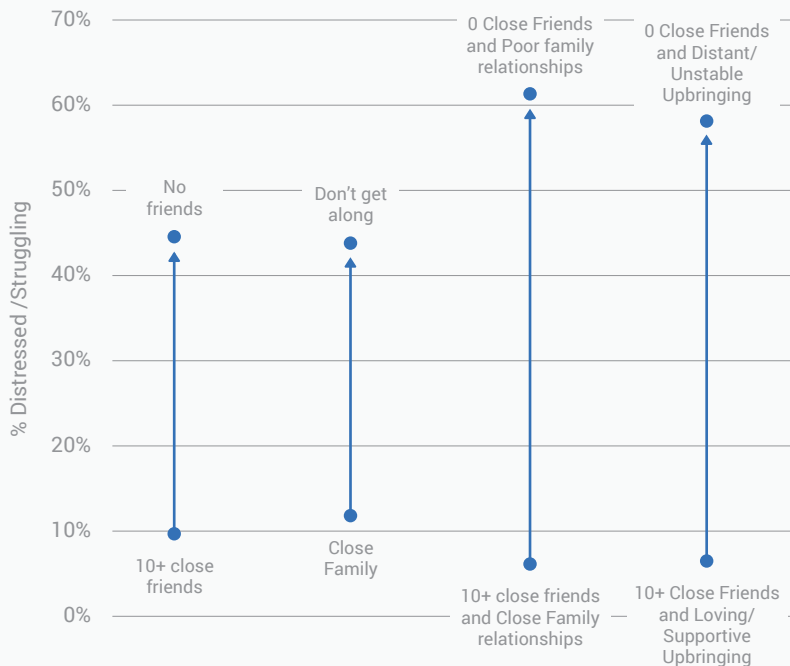
This pattern was similar for those who grew up in stable and loving homes where 78% and 73% had friends they could confide in and rely on respectively, a 17-20% difference compared to those who grew up in unstable and emotionally distant homes. Thus, having a stable, loving childhood home and strong relationships with one's adult family are strongly associated with more friendships and higher quality friendships in adulthood.

An additive impact of family relationships and friendships on mental wellbeing

Among those with close family relationships and a large number of friends, 74% were Succeeding or Thriving compared to only 14% of those who did not get along with their family and had no close friends. Conversely, only 6% of people with close family relationships and a large number of friends were Distressed or Struggling with their mental wellbeing, in contrast to 61% of people who didn't get along with their family and who did not have any close friends (Figure 4.5). Thus, the risk of mental health challenges is ten times lower for those with a large number of both close family relationships and friendships.

Figure 4.5: The combined impact of family relationships and friendship on mental wellbeing

Having having no close friends and not getting along with family were both associated with four times higher risk of mental health struggles or distress compared to having many close friends and family. When combined the risk was ten times higher suggesting that close friendships and family relationships are additive to our wellbeing.



This was a much larger difference in risk compared to that conferred by either not having close friends or getting along with family where the percentage Distressed or Struggling decreased from 44% to about 10% when going from either no friends to 10+ friends or poor family relationships to many close relationships. Thus, the benefits of close family and friendships appear to be additive in nature.

Indeed, having friends can also lift mental wellbeing when people experienced a difficult

childhood or when they don't get along with family as an adult. For example, 58% of those who grew up in homes that were emotionally distant and unstable and also had no close friends were struggling with their mental wellbeing but this reduced to 19% for those with a similarly difficult upbringing but who had more than 10 close friends. Similarly, 61% of people who didn't get along with their family and who had 0 close friends were struggling with their mental wellbeing but this reduced to 27% for those with similarly poor family relationships but who had more than 10 close friends.