

# What are the benefits of renewing old friendships?

## Background

Most people connect with or befriend hundreds of people in their lifetime, but are only able to maintain relationships with a small number. Relationships also continue to change over time, whether that be due to busy schedules, moving away, or other life circumstances. Dormant ties are defined as a relationship between people who have not communicated for an extended period of time (Levin et al., [2011](#)). For many people, the thought of reconnecting with a dormant tie, or old friend, can evoke feelings of anxiety or discomfort. This resistance is often a fear of social rejection or uncertainty about how they would respond (Liu et al., [2022](#)).

## Purpose

The purpose of this brief is to review what is known about the benefits of reviving old connections.

## Evidence from Existing Studies

The literature suggests that there may be a variety of benefits in reaching out to old ties. For example, reaching out to an old friend or peer requires less time and effort than current relationships (e.g. simply reaching out or letting them know you've thought of them) (Levin et al., [2011](#); Ramirez et al., [2017](#)). With the use of social media, it is easier to maintain social ties with little effort but reap the benefits of an increasing social network size (Ramirez et al., [2017](#)).

Pennington ([2021](#)) investigated how young adults perceived the value of maintaining their dormant ties on social media. Participants of the study were recruited from a public university and used social media on a daily basis (Pennington, [2021](#)). Through semi-structured interviews, Pennington ([2021](#)) examined a participant's relationship with an individual on their social media who they had a genuine connection with but had not communicated with online or in-person for at least six months. Two key reasons for maintaining an online connection with those identified individuals were the potential to reconnect and to gain social capital (Pennington, [2021](#)). Participants identified that they would be willing to re-activate those dormant ties if the opportunity came up for specific reasons, such as fulfilling a need for connection or intimacy (Pennington, [2021](#)). Regarding social capital, participants stayed connected to these individuals because they could serve as a resource later on, such as for networking or having someone to see when travelling abroad (Pennington, [2021](#)). Overall, participants appreciated the minimal effort needed to stay connected on social media with dormant ties because of the potential for positive interactions (e.g. reconnection) or social benefits (e.g. networking) (Pennington, [2021](#)).

Levin et al. ([2011](#)) investigated the impact of reconnecting with strong and weak dormant ties in a sample of 224 executives from varying organizations. The executives were asked to identify two individuals whom they had a relationship that they believed would help them with a work

project but had not contacted for at least three years (Levin et al., [2011](#)). Prior to reaching out, executives were sent a survey to list up to fifteen current ties whom they already consulted with for their work project and indicated how useful they were and their level of closeness (Levin et al., [2011](#)). After executives reconnected with dormant ties, they submitted a short essay on their experiences and were asked to complete a second survey to evaluate their exchanges with the dormant ties and two randomly selected current ties (one close and one distant) (Levin et al., [2011](#)). Researchers hypothesized that reaching out to dormant ties would provide greater novelty, knowledge exchange, and efficiency than reaching out to their current ties for advice due to factors such as trust and a previously shared perspective (Levin et al., [2011](#)). The results supported these hypotheses, suggesting that once a level of intimacy is reached, relationships can still be impactful even if it becomes dormant for some time (Levin et al., [2011](#)).

In a follow-up study involving a similar sample of executives, they investigated how individuals selected which dormant tie to reconnect with (Walter et al., [2015](#)). Using a similar two-stage approach to this study as Levin et al. ([2011](#)), 156 executives from an Executive MBA class were asked to complete an initial survey to gather basic information about the dormant contacts they considered reaching out to. After the participants had reconnected with their dormant tie, they were asked to submit a short-essay and complete a second survey on their exchanges with that contact. Researchers hypothesized that participants would want to seek advice from a dormant contact who was someone of higher status, who they expect to be trustworthy and helpful, and who they had known well or frequently interacted with (Walter et al., [2015](#)). Contrastingly, researchers also postulated that in regard to perceived value, participants would see less value in reconnecting with someone from their past who they knew well or constantly interacted with because of a perceived lack of novelty (Walter et al., [2015](#)). Results of the study demonstrated that even with less novelty, participants were more comfortable with reaching out to a dormant tie they had a strong relationship rather than dealing with the anxiety of rejection from someone else (Walter et al., [2015](#)). However, a previously strong relationship still did not fully address the underlying anxiety of reaching out (Walter et al., [2015](#)).

As discussed above, anxious feelings are one of the main barriers for individuals reaching out to old connections. Besides the fear of rejection, where do these feelings come from? Another contributor could be the underestimation of the appreciation a responder may feel when being reached out to. To investigate this, Liu et al. ([2022](#)) conducted a series of preregistered experiments to analyze the experiences between those who initiate contact and those who receive it. Experiment 1 involved participants recollecting an instance when someone from their past reached out to them. Findings from this experiment showed that the initiator underestimated how much the responder appreciated it (Liu et al., [2022](#)). To validate this finding, they conducted a field experiment for college students on campus to write a note to a peer they wanted to reconnect with, which yielded similar results (Liu et al., [2022](#)). The third and fourth experiments were similar but also involved a small gift in addition, or instead of, a note (Liu et al., [2022](#)). The findings from these experiments also warranted the same result: there was a consistent underestimation of the appreciation a responder felt from the action (Liu et al., [2022](#)).

### **Case Study: The Maintenance of Dormant and Commemorative Ties by Young Adults through Social Media**



Pennington (2021) investigated how young adult social media users maintain ‘friendships’ with dormant or commemorative ties (individuals from significant life events, such as travelling abroad) using social media platforms. Through semi-structured interviews, 12 of the 23 participants identified dormant relationships with a person on their social media (no communication within the last six months).

Study participants noted themes of *reconnection* and *social capital* when referring to their dormant ties. An interest in reconnection came from a need for intimacy or connection with someone they still cared about. Alternatively, participants who specified social capital reasons for maintaining the connection focused more on non-relational benefits from that relationship (e.g. seeking advice or opportunities). These benefits are noted as “low cost” since staying connected on social media required little effort. Additionally, these dormant ties allowed for diversity within their networks.

## Analyses from the Canadian Social Connection Survey

In the 2022 Canadian Social Connection Survey, participants were asked how likely they would be to make plans with specific groups of people (e.g. family members, best friends, casual friends, neighbours). For each group, they indicated if they were very unlikely, unlikely, somewhat unlikely, somewhat likely, likely, or very likely to make plans after being reached out to. Participants did not have to specify if these were currently strong or dormant ties.

Best friends (91.4%), family members (89.6%), casual friends (81.3%), classmates (72.1%), and co-workers (69%) are groups in that participants indicated a high likelihood of making plans, suggesting that the majority of former robust social connections might be open to reconnecting. For participants that did not indicate a willingness to make plans with these groups, factors such as lower social self-efficacy or higher social anxiety could have contributed to their responses. In comparison, for weaker social ties, participants were less but still likely to make plans with neighbours (59.8%) and acquaintances (53%), but at a lower proportion compared to the other groups.

## Discussion

The literature summarized above suggests that people need more social connections and that dormant ties are often a missed opportunity for renewed and valuable social connections. In an increasingly connected world finding or reaching out to old friends is becoming more common, especially with the advent of social media and other tools that facilitate social connections. There is a decent foundation for research on how people appreciate being reached out to by old friends and the benefits, but there are still gaps in the literature. Two of the studies cited above focused specifically on the experiences of executives, rather than the general population (Levin et al., [2011](#); Walter et al., [2015](#)). The evidence above explores studies that were conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, they do not account for the relationships that may have become dormant at this time due to COVID-19 restrictions. These sudden circumstances may influence an individual’s experiences of reaching out to old connections differently compared to regular life events (e.g. moving away). Future research should pursue samples that could be more generalizable to larger populations to better understand the



benefits and barriers of reaching out to old connections. Moreover, a better understanding of the fear of rejection and how to mitigate the anxiety towards reaching out would be a key question to explore. Since the reviewed studies occurred before the COVID-19 pandemic, future research should also consider how reaching out to dormant ties post-pandemic may be different.

Additionally, exploring the different motivations for reaching out would be essential since the intentions of participants in the reviewed studies varied (Levin et al., [2011](#); Walter et al., [2015](#); Pennington, [2021](#)).

Finally, more research is needed on the long-term impacts of reconnecting with old friends (e.g. health, relational, or identity consequences) (Pennington, [2021](#)). This could investigate if the immediate benefits from reconnecting continue long term and if the rekindled relationships are maintained or become dormant again.

## Conclusion

Based on the available evidence and our analyses of the Canadian Social Connection Survey, we recommend that individuals reach out to their old ties. This can sometimes be accomplished through the use of social media and other networking tools. Interventions that help build people's social skills and confidence to engage with old ties could further support people's social networks. These interventions could be facilitated through the work of health care providers, such as counsellors or psychologists, or at the grassroots level in community-based programming.

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