

A Place Among Others

Friendship, loneliness, and the work of belonging

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You leave an evening with people you like and realize that hardly anyone knows what your week has been like. You listened, helped clear the table and asked good questions. There were warm moments. Still, on the way home, you feel alone.

Another evening, you spend several hours by yourself and feel restored. Nobody needed an answer from you. There was time to cook, read or walk. The difference is not simply whether someone else was present. It is what kind of contact you wanted, what was available, and whether there was room for you within it.

Loneliness can be difficult to admit. We may imagine that other people already have their people, that needing friendship should have been settled years ago, or that asking for company exposes something embarrassing. The wish can become quieter precisely when it needs acknowledgment. Before making a plan to become more social, we might ask a more personal question: what am I missing when I feel alone?

A wish that deserves a more particular name

Perhaps you miss someone who asks a second question and remembers your answer. Perhaps you want ordinary companionship rather than a deep conversation. You may want people with whom your humor, language, background or way of moving through the world makes sense. You may need practical help, a shared activity, or someone willing to stay present while you are having a difficult time.

Those wishes overlap, but one does not automatically answer another. A friendly group can offer pleasure while leaving a need for private understanding unmet. A close friend may know you well and be unable to help with a practical burden. A partner cannot supply every kind of belonging. There can be value in several relationships with different forms of participation, without turning your social life into a project to optimize.

Hawkey and Cacioppo's review distinguishes loneliness from simply being alone and considers how perceived disconnection can interact with vigilance for social threat [1]. That perspective invites attention to the meaning we give an exchange. It does not establish that loneliness is mistaken or that exclusion is imaginary. A feeling and the conditions around it both deserve a hearing.

We also need room for solitude. Some people genuinely want less conversation or fewer commitments. Others enjoy being alone but feel distressed when there is nobody they can turn toward. The task is to understand the difference in your life, rather than use an ideal of independence to dismiss the wish for connection.

The ways we protect our place

When belonging has felt uncertain, participation can become careful. We may entertain, help, ask questions or agree, while keeping the parts of ourselves that might complicate the welcome out of view. These actions may express real generosity and skill. They may also protect against an unwelcome answer.

In *Coming Home to Yourself*, I explore how belonging can become something we feel we must earn. In *Meet Me Before You Move Me*, I also emphasize a necessary counterweight: needing to be understood does not give us exclusive authority over another person's reality [B1, B2]. Together, these questions help us examine both self-erasure and the pressure we may place on others when connection feels urgent.

You might discover that you rarely tell a friend when you are having a hard time. You might also notice that, once you begin, it is difficult to make room for their experience. Neither observation needs to become a judgment about your character. It asks how the encounter is organized and what another way of participating might make possible.

History can illuminate this organization. It cannot be assigned from the outside. A person may have learned that needs were burdensome, or may be responding to a friend who really is distracted, unreliable or dismissive. Exhaustion, language differences, sensory load and unequal demands may explain more than a story about fear of intimacy. An explanation becomes useful when it can be corrected by the person and by present evidence.

If a pause or change in contact quickly feels like abandonment, *When Distance Feels Like Danger* explores attachment expectations and ways to stay connected while retaining your own judgment.

Loneliness as a signal, and the expectation that it will hurt to answer it

An evolutionary account by Cacioppo, Cacioppo and Boomsma proposes that loneliness helps draw attention to weakened connection and supports efforts to restore it; the same account considers increased vigilance for social threat [9]. That combination helps explain why wanting company and apprehension can coexist. It is a theoretical perspective, not proof that each lonely feeling has a useful purpose.

It may be misleading to separate healthy loneliness from wounded aloneness as though they were two unrelated kinds of people. You may have an ordinary need for company and carry an old expectation of rejection at the same time. You may be surrounded by people and feel without a confidant. You may also choose solitude because it is restorative or because current settings demand too much.

The question is how the feeling functions in this moment. Does it help you recognize a wish and make a proportionate invitation? Does it become a verdict that you are fundamentally unwanted? Does contact bring actual pressure or exclusion? What helps you tell these possibilities apart?

When not being met becomes a story about being unworthy

For a child, the people needed for care are also people whose responses help shape what it means to need. A repeated lack of welcome can be difficult to understand as a limitation in the adult. Some children come to organize experience around the belief that they are too much, not interesting enough, difficult to love or responsible for keeping connection intact.

That is one possible developmental story. It needs the person's history and recognition; it cannot be read backward from adult distress. Experiences with peers, schools, partners or institutions may also matter. A present relationship can really be unreliable, and practical conditions can make belonging scarce. We should ask about those realities before assigning an old wound.

Shame can make an unmet wish feel like an exposed defect. The person begins monitoring how they speak, look or appear, and may attack themselves before anyone else can. Shahar, Doron and Szepsenwol examined this possible link in a community study: reported emotional abuse, shame, self-criticism and social-anxiety symptoms were associated in their proposed model [10]. Cross-sectional findings support inquiry, not a demonstrated childhood-to-adult causal chain.

Social anxiety is therefore not simply a lack of willingness to meet people. For some, being noticed carries the possibility of being found wanting. The person may long for contact while trying to keep the wish hidden. We can ask what self-monitoring accomplishes and what it prevents, while preserving the possibility that caution accurately reflects the setting.

Emotional homelessness

In *Coming Home to Yourself*, I use emotional homelessness to describe a felt lack of a dependable place for oneself within relationship and inner experience. A person may have a literal home, achievements and people who care, yet feel that welcome is provisional: something to secure through effort or protect by needing very little.

The metaphor gives language to a longing that more activity may not answer. Perhaps the wish is for someone to become curious rather than immediately advise; for a preference to carry weight; for help that changes a burden; or for care that does not require repayment before it can be received. These wishes are different. Naming them keeps one relationship from becoming responsible for an undefined promise of complete belonging.

Coming home to yourself can begin with how you meet the lonely moment. Rather than immediately concluding that the feeling proves inadequacy, you may notice the wish and the hurt with some company or space. There can be grief for an experience you missed. There may also be anger about what is happening now, a need for rest, or uncertainty about what the feeling means.

You do not have to enter a painful memory to do this. An ordinary object in the room, movement, a few words on paper or appropriate support may help you retain choice. Deeper injury can require an attuned

therapeutic relationship rather than solitary practice. The educational task is to leave enough room for experience and judgment, not reproduce trauma processing in a worksheet.

If accepting kindness quickly becomes a need to repay or prove that you deserve it, *When Being Loved Feels Like Owing Something* explores receiving care without making it an immediate debt.

The critic and the response that refuses to keep trying

Through a parts lens, one response may try to secure belonging by becoming impressive, agreeable or needed. Another may refuse the demand and move toward distance, numbness or rest. Richard Schwartz's account of IFS describes managerial criticism, protective distance and conflict among parts; these are clinical model concepts, not demonstrated biological entities [11].

You might hear an inner rule that you must never appear foolish, needy or unprepared. Another response may say that it is safer to stop caring about an invitation at all. Before asking either to change, consider what it expects to happen. Is the critic trying to anticipate rejection? Is distance preserving energy, dignity or a real boundary? Does that account fit, or is something else occurring?

Compassion does not require agreeing with harsh self-judgment. You can understand why a response developed while examining how it treats you and affects your relationships. The inquiry should also be able to find that a skill is a freely chosen gift. Kindness, humor, thoughtfulness and competence are not false merely because they have sometimes helped protect a place.

A manageable next step might be letting a dependable person hear one modest preference without adding a performance. You predict what may happen, choose conditions and a stopping point, then review the actual response. Welcome may bring relief or unexpected sadness. A poor fit may call for a different request or recipient. Neither result authorizes the instructor to decide your inner story for you.

For a fuller exploration of belonging through performance and usefulness, read *The Life You Keep Trying to Deserve*. It considers how genuine ambition and contribution can coexist with pressure to continually prove your worth.

The friendships we choose, and the relationships we already know

Sometimes the loneliness concerns the kind of friendship we keep choosing. We may repeatedly become close to people whose attention is difficult to obtain, whose needs organize the relationship, or whose approval seems to promise something especially important. A similar arrangement may appear in partnership: I will take care of you, ask for little and hope that, eventually, you will turn toward me.

Attachment theory calls our learned expectations about ourselves and others internal working models. They concern questions such as whether another person will respond when we need them, whether our wishes have a legitimate place, and what we must do to preserve connection. They can operate before we have put them into words. An old expectation may help organize a new encounter, even when the new person has not yet shown who they are [12, 13].

These expectations can influence several choices: whom we notice, how we understand their behavior, the role we take, and how long we continue investing when our needs remain unanswered. These are distinct processes. Choosing an unavailable person differs from expecting rejection from someone who is available; both differ from never letting a friend know what we need. Inquiry becomes more useful when it identifies where the pattern actually occurs.

There is research connecting early attachment with later friendship. Vieth, Englund and Simpson followed a cohort from infancy to age 32 and found that infant attachment security predicted adult satisfaction with close friends [12]. Loeb and colleagues followed adolescents into adulthood; early attachment insecurity predicted difficulty seeking and receiving support from friends and later negative interactions with romantic partners [13]. These findings support links across development and relationships. Neither study demonstrates that adults deliberately or unconsciously select friends who recreate childhood injury.

A related account comes from Andersen and Chen's work on the relational self and transference: a new person can activate a representation of someone important from the past, along with expectations and ways of experiencing ourselves in relation to them [14]. This offers a framework for understanding how an old relational position can become present again. In clinical language, we might call a recurring arrangement a reenactment. That is a possible interpretation to examine with the person, rather than a hidden motive to declare.

For someone who remembers having to work hard for a caregiver's attention, being the indispensable friend may carry both affection and an old hope of finally being chosen. Familiarity may make the role easier to recognize or perform, without making it satisfying. Through a parts lens, a critical response may insist that more effort will secure the friendship, while another response wants to withdraw from the whole arrangement. This is one possible formulation. A person does not have to discover a childhood parallel for their present experience to deserve attention.

Friendship and partnership can also differ. Someone may trust long-standing friends while becoming frightened in romance. A dependable friendship may be an important counterexample to a story of lifelong disconnection. Later peer experiences, current exclusion, shared interests, culture, access and opportunity also shape the relationships available to us. Another person's disregard remains their responsibility; recognizing our participation does not mean that we caused or wanted mistreatment.

For a fuller account of these expectations in partnership, read *The Love We Expect, the Love We Can Receive*. The question here is whether a similar expectation appears in friendship, and where your friendships offer a different experience.

Making a different choice, without abandoning yourself

Working models are working understandings: they can be revised through experience. Chow, Ruhl and Buhrmester's longitudinal adolescent study found links in both directions between friendship attachment and relational experiences, including exclusion and intimacy [15]. This supports attending to what happens in relationships now. It does not establish that a particular reflective exercise changes attachment, or that choosing a different friend guarantees repair of an early injury.

You can begin with two or three friendships, including one in which you feel more at ease. What initially drew you toward each person? What did you hope would become possible? What role did you take as closeness developed? Describe ordinary conduct: who makes room to listen, follows through, initiates contact or respects a limit? Differences matter as much as repetitions. There may be no single pattern.

Then ask what you are using to decide where to invest. Is it shared pleasure, curiosity and reliability? Is someone especially compelling because their approval is hard to obtain? Do you make room for people who show steady interest, or dismiss them before discovering whether you enjoy their company? Steadiness does not require attraction or compatibility. You are allowed to find someone dependable and still not want a close friendship.

If an older relationship comes to mind, hold the connection as a question: does this resemble something I actually remember, and what is different now? You might recognize a once-necessary way of staying connected. You might also find that the present friendship is the main problem. Understanding the history need not become another demand to keep tolerating it.

In an independently invented example, someone realizes that they feel most valued when friends need advice, yet seldom speak about their own difficulties. They wonder whether usefulness became their familiar place in the family. One friend has occasionally asked about them, but they tend to change the subject. Another repeatedly redirects the conversation. The inquiry is about both the person's participation and the different capacities of these friends.

N - Notice the moment. They describe the last exchange: a friend asked how they were, and they gave a quick answer before offering help. **O - Open to understanding.** They notice a wish to be known and a concern that asking for attention could burden the friendship. **T - Test the explanation.** They remember that this friend has sometimes listened well. The expectation of being unwelcome may fit the other friendship better.

I - Initiate a small experiment. With the willing friend, they ask whether there is time to talk briefly about a difficult week. **C - Check what happened.** The friend listens, but has to leave sooner than hoped; the person feels partly met and still disappointed. **E - Extend the learning.** They consider another conversation with this friend and a clearer limit on how much advice they offer in the more one-sided friendship. The result supports a more particular choice, rather than a conclusion that all friends are safe or unavailable.

Studies of behavioral experiments offer some support for examining beliefs through experience; McManus and colleagues studied belief change with nonclinical participants [16]. The friendship inquiry here is an educational application, not a tested treatment for reenactment. You can rehearse privately, work with a fictional situation or seek appropriate support before changing a relationship.

Over time, choosing differently may mean giving more attention to mutual interest, room to differ, confidentiality, follow-through and a willingness to repair. It may mean asking more clearly, receiving care when it is offered, or reducing investment where disregard continues. The aim is enough awareness to

distinguish an old expectation from present conduct, and enough freedom to let both your wish and the other person's actual response influence what you choose.

An invitation is different from a test

Waiting for someone to contact us can feel safer than risking an invitation. Sometimes waiting is reasonable: we have initiated repeatedly and want to know whether the friendship includes their effort. Sometimes we are withholding our wish and hoping the other person will discover it. The distinction matters because another person cannot reliably answer an invitation they have never received.

A clear invitation might be modest: would you like to meet for a short walk on Saturday? It names an activity and a possible time, while leaving an answer open. It need not contain an explanation of why you deserve company. It also need not carry the hidden question, do I matter enough for you to rearrange everything?

Research by Boothby and colleagues found that participants in several getting-acquainted settings often underestimated how much their conversation partners liked them [2]. This offers one reason to question a confident prediction of rejection. It does not tell you what a particular person feels. The answer might be yes, no, another time or no response. You can learn from it without making it a verdict on your worth.

In a fictional example, a person wants to reconnect with an old friend and predicts that a brief invitation will be unwelcome. They send one message suggesting a short call. The friend says the week is full and suggests a later date. The call happens, but it is shorter and less intimate than hoped. The original prediction was only partly useful: contact was welcome, availability was limited, and the wish to be known remained. The next step might be another conversation, a different expectation, or seeking additional places for connection. Sending more messages to force certainty would answer a different need.

Familiarity has a place beside intimacy

Some of the people who make a day feel less anonymous do not know our history. They recognize us at a class, greet us in the neighborhood, or share an interest. Sandstrom and Dunn found associations between interactions with acquaintances and well-being and belonging [3]. Such contact need not become a close friendship to matter.

It can also provide a beginning that places less demand on either person. Returning to an accessible activity creates opportunities to become familiar. Asking a simple question may be enough. You do not need to turn every exchange into disclosure or prove that a gathering has changed your life.

Hall's studies of recently relocated adults and first-year students linked time together, shared activity and some forms of everyday talk with developing closeness [4]. These findings support making room for repeated contact. They do not supply a number of hours everyone must complete before friendship is real. Familiarity can grow at different paces, and repeated presence cannot manufacture mutual interest or erase exclusion.

The setting matters. A recurring group that is too expensive, physically inaccessible or organized around a culture where you are unwelcome is not an exercise you have failed. Practical changes, a different setting, advocacy or support may be needed. Reflection should help you see those conditions rather than persuade you to adapt to all of them.

Being known without giving everything away

A friendship can deepen when something more truthful becomes speakable. That may be as small as saying that your week has been difficult, that you would rather listen than go somewhere noisy, or that you are pleased to see the other person. Disclosure need not begin with your most painful experience.

Laurenceau, Barrett and Pietromonaco's diary studies linked intimacy with disclosure and perceived responsiveness [5]. The important educational question is not how much you reveal, but what happens between people when something is offered. Does the listener show interest? Can you correct a misunderstanding? Is there room for their experience too?

You might ask whether now is a good time for a brief conversation. You might say what kind of response would help: company, listening, ideas or practical assistance. The other person can answer honestly. Their limit may disappoint you without being cruel. Their offered attention may feel welcome, intrusive or insufficient; you remain able to name the difference.

When something does reach you, it can be worth pausing to notice it. Fosha and Thoma's clinical writing explores reflecting on helpful experiences within psychotherapy [6]. Here, the simpler educational invitation is to notice what an ordinary encounter was actually like. Relief, embarrassment, warmth, grief, uncertainty and no identifiable change are all possible. No friend has to become a therapist, and no feeling is required to certify that care occurred.

Two people belong in the friendship

A friendship needs room for preference, limits, influence and responsibility. Bowen's account of differentiation asks how a person can hold a position while recognizing realistic dependence and participating in relationship [7]. In this setting, that might mean choosing a quieter activity, saying that a comment hurt, receiving a different account, or making good on an agreement you freely made.

Authenticity does not mean saying everything without considering its impact. A friend is not required to hold unlimited disclosure or provide constant reassurance. Equally, a request for a limit does not excuse chronic disregard. What people do over time matters more than whether one difficult exchange was beautifully worded.

Reciprocity also need not mean identical contributions. A friend facing illness may have little capacity to initiate; another may provide transport while someone else offers companionship. The questions are whether the arrangement is understood, whether people can speak about it, and whether care leaves room for more than one person's needs. Counting every favor can obscure generosity. Refusing any discussion of imbalance can obscure exploitation.

When a friendship changes

Friendships can become strained through an injury, a neglected agreement, a move, changed health, different responsibilities or a shift in what each person wants. Sometimes a direct conversation reveals a repairable misunderstanding. Sometimes it reveals a limit that neither person can change.

It helps to describe conduct before assigning motive. A friend canceled three plans without suggesting another time. That is an observation. They never cared about me is a broader conclusion. There may be an explanation that changes the meaning, while the repeated cancellations still affect your ability to depend on the plan.

If you contributed to a hurt, acknowledgment should become an action: correcting a comment, protecting a confidence or making a more realistic agreement. If you were hurt, understanding another person's difficulty does not remove the need for repair. The conversation may be mutual without responsibility being equal.

There is grief in learning that a friendship cannot be what it was, or what you hoped it would become. Some friendships end without a final conversation. You may need somewhere else to speak about the loss. You do not need to condemn the whole relationship or produce forgiveness before making a different choice. Loneliness after a loss may be a sign that something mattered; it need not be treated only as a thought to correct.

If a friendship has changed or someone cannot offer the recognition you hoped for, *The Conversation That May Never Come* makes room for grief and unfinished relationships without requiring closure or renewed contact.

A place we can return to

Community offers forms of belonging that a single friendship may not provide: shared activity, mutual aid, service, creative work or the ordinary experience of being recognized. Contribution can be a meaningful expression of who you are. The question is whether contribution is your only permitted place, and whether the arrangements are workable for the people carrying them.

A sustainable beginning might be one recurring activity with a manageable role. Before agreeing, ask about cost, transport, timing, access, expectations and the freedom to leave. Afterward, ask whether there was room to participate, whether your capacity was respected, and whether you want to return. A group can fit imperfectly and still offer something valuable. It can also be pleasant and wrong for what you need.

The friendship need not bear every longing, and the community need not become a new family. Different kinds of connection can coexist with rest and solitude. When one opportunity is unavailable, your wish may still deserve another setting or additional support.

Learning from the encounter

The Friendship modules use NOTICE to help you name a wish, examine an explanation, choose a manageable experiment and review its actual effects. The five-module pathway is now available. You can use this article to begin reflecting on an ordinary encounter without taking the modules. A clearer invitation, a respected limit, an honest disappointment or an accessible place found can all be useful information. They do not have to become immediate relief.

A 2026 meta-analysis by Lasgaard and colleagues found benefits across varied loneliness interventions, while rating confidence in effect estimates as low or very low [8]. It supports thoughtful development and evaluation, not a promise that this particular pathway reduces loneliness. BKL's sequence has not been tested as a loneliness intervention.

The invitation is to participate with more awareness and choice: to let your wish for connection have a voice, make room for the other person, and recognize which conditions help a relationship become livable. Friendship includes initiative and receiving, pleasure and disappointment, ordinary reliability and the freedom to differ. Belonging becomes more possible when those experiences have somewhere to go.

Explore further

The linked companion articles are free to read. If you want guided practice, these optional modules offer more focused work. **Modules require purchase or invited reviewer access; current availability is shown on each page.** You can continue the Friendship article without opening any of them.

Individual Parts, Module 3: Understand the protector's job - explore the concern behind a critical or withdrawing response while allowing your own account to correct the explanation.

Receiving, Module 2: The Urge to Repay, Perform, or Minimize - examine what happens when welcome care begins to feel like an obligation.

Achievement and the Inner Critic, Module 2: The Inner Bargain: If I Perform, I Belong - explore the pressure to earn a place through performance.

Differentiation, Module 3: Speak an I-position - practice expressing a position while making room for another person's perspective.

Repair, Module 4: Accountability That Becomes Action - connect acknowledgment of hurt with a specific, responsible next step.

Choose the question that matters to you; these are optional routes rather than prerequisites.

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B1. Kennedy, B. Meet Me Before You Move Me. Recognition, differentiation and limits on psychological authority.

B2. Kennedy, B. Coming Home to Yourself. Emotional homelessness, belonging and a kinder relationship with experience.

I draw on these works for empirical findings and clinical theory, alongside my own clinical formulation. The everyday examples and practices are an educational synthesis. BKL's Friendship pathway has not been evaluated as a loneliness intervention.