Friendship, Loneliness, and Community · About 4 minutes

The Kind of Company You're Missing

A fuller social calendar may not answer a particular wish

A day can be full of people and leave you wishing one of them knew how you were really doing.

Loneliness is often met with broad advice: get out more, join something, build a community. Sometimes that helps. Sometimes the person is already out, already participating, and missing something much more specific.

Familiarity has a place

Pavel, in this fictional example, knows several regulars at his swimming pool. They exchange greetings, compare the water temperature, and complain about a broken locker. He likes being recognized. After a difficult week, though, he wishes someone knew why he has been distracted. The pool conversation begins to feel meaningless because it cannot hold that part of his life.

That conclusion discards something he enjoys. Research has found associations between everyday contact with less-close acquaintances and well-being and belonging.[1] It offers support for taking casual familiarity seriously, without treating it as a substitute for close friendship.

Pavel might keep liking the greetings and also acknowledge that he misses being known. The pool need not provide both. He isn't obliged to disclose the difficult week to someone whose response he cannot yet judge.

What would different company offer?

A useful question is less "How can I be more social?" and more "What would I want someone to share with me?" The answer could concern an ordinary activity or a conversation that has time to wander. It could mean someone remembering an important date, or practical solidarity during a difficult period.

Those wishes do not all require the same relationship. You might enjoy an acquaintance for one shared interest and want more reciprocity from an existing friend. Starting again with strangers may be the last thing you need.

It is also possible that the available company isn't welcome. If Pavel were being mocked at the pool, there would be no reason to preserve a positive interpretation for the sake of this example. Exclusion and disregard are experiences to take seriously. Their remedy is not necessarily greater openness from the person receiving them.

Clarity can reveal a real absence

Knowing what you miss does not ensure that you can find it. Transport, fatigue, disability, caring work, money, or discrimination may limit the possibilities. A person can be ready for friendship and have few workable opportunities. That deserves recognition rather than another instruction to be confident.

Pavel could change his description from "These conversations mean nothing" to "I enjoy being recognized here, and I miss having someone who knows more of my life." That preserves the actual pleasure without pretending it answers his deeper wish.

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The clearer sentence may bring sadness. It need not immediately become a plan. A wish for connection can be acknowledged before there is a suitable invitation to make, and another person's interest remains theirs to offer.

Before looking for more company, it can help to hear which kind of company you miss.

What would you have liked someone to ask? The answer can tell you something about the company you have been missing.

Companion reading · A Place Among Others

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Friendship, Loneliness, and Community (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Sandstrom, G. M., & Dunn, E. W. (2014). Social interactions and well-being: The surprising power of weak ties. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 40(7), 910–922. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167214529799 Source.

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