

q advice: **RELATIONSHIPS MATTER**

3 ways to bring more value into your relationships

In building a value model over a period of some 16 years, it's hardly surprising to find science from the likes of Robin Dunbar, a British anthropologist, that reinforces why in a digital age of easier connection we're simultaneously feeling more dishevelled or disconnected in relationships than ever before.

From studying primate groups [Dunbar](#) found that based on brain size we are actually hard wired to a limited number of meaningful connections at any given moment in time: the magic number being one hundred and fifty. And it's surprising how accurately or regularly the number shows up historically, in business and even social circles. Given we're living in a hyper connected age, some people find those numbers surprising for one of two reasons. Some find it laughable; thinking anything less than a rounded thousand 'social' means there must be something wrong with you. Conversely others find it shocking as they acknowledge, somewhat closer to truth based on Dunbar's work, they'd be lucky to have five real friends. Regardless which side of that conversation you favour there are three things all can do to improve relationships.

1. Quality time

Our ancestors lived in hunter gather communities just shy of one hundred and fifty and average English village circles, circa 18th century, sat around one hundred and sixty. Yet many people in a global village try to forge a greater number of new relationships within the time it takes to drink a single cup of coffee smashing out a social post. Even those reaching for volume, when reflecting honestly, know that collective connections of every Tom, Dick and Harriet clumped into a happy bucket called 'friends' doesn't make a relationship. Many of these folks could pass you on the street or sit next to you you'd never even know. Dunbar cheekily suggests we must be careful who we date, live with or marry given we do tend to spend as much as 80% of our time talking to the same tight group of friends: likely to be as few as five. We may trade out one of those when we commit to a more intimate relationship!

The quality of time we spend with people forges healthier relationships. We may have different circles, sure, yet it's good to consciously not spread ourselves a little too thin.

2. Be fully present

It's not uncommon to see friends, colleagues, partners, and lovers spending time together yet simultaneously the relationship diminishes or dissolves regardless. How often have you found yourself sitting with a connection (any of the aforementioned categories) only to feel you're having a cappuccino with a zombie? Their physical body may be with you yet arms are horizontal and hands wrapped awkwardly, constant thumb typing, around a device. Glued, as it were, wide eyed, or being spiritually and energetically sucked into the screen of their smart phone. And if you can't relate to this happening to you perhaps look in the mirror and ask how often you may then be the zombie! Relationships, like a quality game of tennis, require more than one player. If you feel you have to run around the net to return conversations or keep the relationship rally going, the point comes where you'll be over it or burnt out. For the less active participant in play you may find, when you do finally glance up, preferred tennis partners have dwindled in numbers, tired of the maintenance of it all. Be where you are then is a healthy philosophy to live by.

3. The power of personal effort

Social media companies (dopamine-dealing deviants in some ways) do their utmost to ensure their own brand users easily procure regular fixes or hits with minimum effort. Automation then, or the language of emojis (thumb likes or other cutesy icons of fake fluffy loveliness) are lazy when it comes to the deeper communication of great relationships. We all know algorithms and reminders make it easier to remember stuff, 'personalise' messages or celebrate milestones. Yet it's when we demonstrate a deeper level of both listening and action our relationships kick in another gear. As Sean Connery in the movie 'Finding Forrester' alluded to when revealing the secret to a woman's heart: it's an unexpected gift at an unexpected time. The same is true for personal effort. Gifts perhaps a little rough around the edges with handmade effort can melt hearts quicker or build stronger bonds than the lovely pre packaged purchase or the perfect hallmark card quote and font. In the same way that hands on effort says 'I care' far greater than just a cheque arriving in the post. Technology helps maintain great relationships, as we've seen with virtual and telephone connections in a world hindered by pandemic and lockdown. Yet simultaneously many folks are already feeling it's not quite the same as real human connectedness with your besties and loved ones. So it's a great reminder to get back to basics, minimise the noise and focus on real human touch.

Mark Carter is an international keynote speaker, trainer and coach. He has over 20 years' experience as a global learning and development professional. His TEDxCasey talk 'Paws and Effect: how teddy bears increase value perception was the movie trailer for his latest book Add Value. You can contact Mark at www.markcarter.com.au

Mark Carter



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