

Ring them first

A short book about waiting for other people to get in touch,
while loneliness settles in as normal

unbry · Free to read, yours to keep

<https://unbry.com/read/ring-them-first>

First edition

Written by AI with human guidance. It can
contain mistakes, which later editions correct.

Contents

1. Before you start
2. The name in the list
3. Why waiting feels right
4. "If they wanted to see me, they'd ring"
5. "I'd only be bothering them"
6. "It's their turn"
7. "It's been too long"
8. What the wait protects you from
9. How the quiet keeps itself going
10. "I'm fine on my own"
11. The man in the paper shop
12. A voice does more than a thumbs up
13. What to say
14. The decision
15. No reply, busy friends and starting from nothing
16. The name in the list again
17. Notes

Before you start

This is a short book and you can read it in two or three sittings. It's about one habit. There are people you like and would be glad to see. You think of them now and then. You don't get in touch, because it's been a while, or it's their turn, or they're probably busy, or if they wanted to hear from you they'd have rung. So you wait. The weeks go by quietly, and after enough of them the quiet stops feeling like a gap and becomes how life is.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that the waiting makes sense from the inside. It protects you from feeling like a nuisance and from the chance of a cool reply, and those are real worries. The second is that the waiting rests on a misreading. The other person's silence feels like information about how they see you. It's nearly always the same hesitation you have, and they're on their sofa reading your silence the same way. Researchers have measured how much people appreciate being contacted, and it's more than the person making contact expects, by a wide and consistent margin. The third is practical. One small rule changes most of it. When you think of someone, you get in touch that day. Chapters 12 and 13 cover what to say and how to make it a habit.

A few things this book isn't. It isn't a case for being more sociable than you'd like to be. If you enjoy your own company and have as much contact as you want, chapter 9 says plainly that you don't have the habit. It doesn't suggest you should chase people who've treated you badly either. If you ended a relationship for a good reason, nothing here asks you to reopen it.

Three cautions.

If you've been low for more than a couple of weeks, with little energy or interest in anything, the withdrawal may be part of depression and not a habit standing alone. The NHS advises seeing a GP if you've had a low mood for more than two weeks, and in England you can refer yourself to NHS talking therapies. Chapter 14 says more.

If the thought of any social contact fills you with dread, so that phone calls, conversations and being looked at are all frightening, that may be social anxiety. It's common and treatable, and a GP is the place to start.

And if you're isolated by circumstances more than by habit, this book will help less. You may be caring for someone round the clock, or housebound, or new to a country. You may not have many names to ring. Chapter 14 points to some places to start, including a route through your GP.

The notes at the back give the studies I've relied on and their limits. Where I'm giving my own reasoning and not a finding, I'll say so.

The name in the list

It's Sunday afternoon, about four, and you're on your phone.

You're looking for a plumber's number, and on the way down the list your thumb passes a name. It's your friend from the old office. For six years you had lunch together most Thursdays. You knew each other's bosses by their faults, and you knew each other's families by name. When you left, you both said it wouldn't change anything.

You open the conversation. The last message is from you. "We must catch up soon!" Underneath it is a thumbs up from them. It's dated fourteen months ago.

You feel a small pang, and then several thoughts arrive at once. It's been over a year, and they haven't been in touch either. If they'd wanted to meet they could have said so at any time. They've got the new job and the children, so they're probably busy. It would be odd to message now, out of nowhere, and you'd have to explain the gap. Anyway, you sent the last proper message. It's their turn.

You close the conversation and find the plumber. The evening goes by. You make something to eat and watch two episodes of something. It's a perfectly all right Sunday, and at the end of it you haven't spoken to anyone since Friday. You notice that, briefly, and then don't think about it.

Nothing dramatic has happened here. You haven't fallen out with your friend. If you passed them in the street you'd both be delighted and stand there talking for twenty minutes. The

friendship is still there, only switched off, and it's waiting for somebody to switch it back on. Each of you believes that somebody should be the other one.

I'll use a few terms throughout. **The wait** is the habit itself, holding off from getting in touch until the other person does. **The first move** is any contact that you start. It might be a message, a call, an invitation or a knock on a door. **The tally** is the running count of whose turn it is. **The quiet** is what builds up when the wait goes on for long enough across enough people. You have fewer plans and fewer calls, and you start to think of yourself as someone who doesn't see many people.

The wait has some regular features. This list is my own observation and not a research finding.

It feels like politeness or dignity, never like avoidance. You're not hiding from your friend. You're respecting their busy life, or declining to chase.

It treats silence as a message. They haven't rung, and that's taken as telling you something about where you stand with them.

It gets stronger with time. After two months a message would have been easy. After fourteen it seems to need an explanation. The longer you wait, the more reason there is to keep waiting.

And it's invisible from outside. Nobody sees you not sending a message. Nothing marks the moment a friendship lapses, so it costs you nothing at the time.

If you're willing, do two small things before chapter 2. First, write down the names of people you've thought about in the past month and didn't contact. I mean people you like, and who came to mind because of a song or a place or a name in a list. Second, look at your last ten exchanges with friends or family and note who started each one. You don't have to act on either list. They're so you know the size of what we're discussing, and the second one may surprise you in either direction.

Why waiting feels right

The wait isn't laziness, and it isn't coldness. If it were, this would be a different book. People who wait are often the most considerate people in any group. They wait because they're thinking about the other person. This chapter sets out the case for waiting as fairly as I can, because you can't change a habit whose reasons you haven't looked at.

I can find four reasons, and each has something real in it.

The first is not wanting to intrude. Your friend has a job, a family and a full week. A message from you is one more thing to answer. You picture them seeing your name, sighing slightly, and thinking they'll have to reply to that at some point. You'd hate to be a chore on someone's list. Leaving them in peace seems the kind thing to do.

The second is evidence. People do what they want to do. Your friend has had fourteen months in which a message would have taken thirty seconds. They haven't sent one. The simplest reading is that they don't especially want to. If that's so, then getting in touch would put them in the position of having to be polite to someone they've moved on from. The silence seems to be telling you something, and you're listening.

The third is fairness. You sent the last real message. In the six years of Thursdays it was usually you who said "lunch?". A friendship ought to run in both directions. If you're always the one who makes

the effort, what does that say? At some point self-respect says stop, and see if they come to you.

The fourth is protection. If you message and get a warm reply, that's lovely. But you might get a cool one, or a vague one, or none. While you don't ask, you don't find out. The friendship stays in a state where it might still be fine. If you sent a message and it fell flat, the fact would be settled and you'd have to live with it. Not knowing seems the better thing to keep.

Underneath these are needs that nobody should be embarrassed about. You want to be wanted and not merely tolerated, and you don't want to be a nuisance. Your friendships should be mutual, and you'd like to avoid being hurt. Every one of those is reasonable.

What I'm going to question is whether the wait serves them. Each of the four reasons depends on a guess about what's going on in the other person's head. The first guesses that they'd find your message a burden, and the second that their silence reflects their wishes. Behind the third is a guess that they're keeping the same tally you are. The fourth guesses that a flat reply is likely and would mean what you fear.

You made all of those guesses alone, on a Sunday afternoon, with no information from your friend at all. The next five chapters take them one at a time and set them against what researchers have found when they've gone and asked the people on the other end.

"If they wanted to see me, they'd ring"

Start with the argument from evidence, because it seems the most hard-headed. People do what they want. They haven't rung, and you draw the conclusion that they don't want to.

The trouble with it is that the same argument is available to them. You haven't rung either, and you've had the same fourteen months they've had. If silence proves lack of interest, then yours proves it about you. Yet you know perfectly well that you'd love to see them. You thought of them warmly this very afternoon. Your silence doesn't come from indifference. You were hesitant, the tally was in your head, and you had a vague sense that too much time had passed.

So you already have a complete explanation for fourteen months of silence from someone who cares, because you're living it. The only question is whether your friend is more likely to be silent for your reasons or for the cold reason you've assigned to them.

Lara Aknin and Gillian Sandstrom have studied exactly this, in a series of seven studies with more than two thousand people. Most people they asked had an old friend they'd lost touch with, and most expressed little interest in getting back in touch. That could look like support for the cold reading, until you see the next part. In two of the studies they picked out the most favourable case. The participants said they wanted to reconnect with the friend and believed the friend would appreciate hearing from them. They had the contact details to hand. The researchers gave them time, there and then, to write a message and send it. Fewer than a third did.

These were people who wanted to, thought it would be welcome, and had the means and the time, and still two thirds of them didn't press send. In another study the researchers asked people how willing they'd be to do various things. Getting in touch with an old friend came out level with talking to a stranger. On average people said they'd be more willing to pick up litter, though not every difference on that list was statistically reliable.

This changes what your friend's silence can tell you. In Aknin and Sandstrom's studies, silence was what most people produced even when they felt warmly and wanted contact. It's the default. It's what happens when nobody does anything, and nobody doing anything is the normal state of affairs. The silence is what you'd see if your friend had gone off you. It's also what you'd see if your friend is sitting on their own sofa on a Sunday and passes your name. They'd feel a pang, think that you haven't been in touch either, and look for the plumber.

It's like two polite people at a doorway, each waiting for the other to go through first. Neither is being cold. If neither moves, though, they'll both be standing there for a long time.

There's an objection. "But some people really have moved on. Not everyone wants to hear from an old colleague." True. Some have. My point is that silence can't tell you which kind your friend is, because both kinds are silent. The only thing that can tell you is a message and what comes back. Chapter 14 deals with what to do when what comes back is nothing.

I'd add one thing from my own reasoning. Somebody has to go first, and it may as well be the one who's read a book about it. Your friend is stuck in the same wait as you, and they haven't had it explained to them. If you hold out for them to break it, you're asking them to do something that two thirds of willing people don't manage, and treating their failure as a verdict on you. If you break it yourself, you'll know within a day or two where things stand, and I think there's a good chance you'll find that things are where they always were.

"I'd only be bothering them"

The kindest-sounding reason for waiting is that your message would be an imposition. They're busy. You'd be one more notification. Better to leave them be.

This is a prediction about how your friend would feel on seeing your name, and researchers have tested that prediction directly.

Peggy Liu, SoYon Rim, Lauren Min and Kate Min ran a series of preregistered experiments. Some participants got in touch with someone in their social circle, either with a short message to say hello or with a small gift. Those participants predicted how much the other person would appreciate it. The researchers then asked the recipients how much they did appreciate it. Across the experiments the result was the same, and the authors call it robust. The people getting in touch underestimated how much it would be appreciated.

The researchers also looked at why. The person on the receiving end was more focused on the pleasant surprise of being thought of. The sender wasn't picturing that. The sender was thinking about whether the message was awkward or whether it needed a reason. The recipient was thinking, "Oh, how nice, I haven't heard from them in ages."

It follows that the effect should be larger when the contact is more of a surprise, and the researchers found that it was. The gap between expected and actual appreciation was bigger when the message came out of the blue. It was also bigger when it came from

someone more distant than a close friend. Those are the very cases where you'd feel most hesitant. After fourteen months of silence, with a friendship that has drifted, you imagine your message being least welcome. But the research says that's where you're underestimating by the most.

A related finding comes from Nicholas Epley and Juliana Schroeder, who worked with commuters on trains and buses. They asked some to talk to a stranger, some to keep to themselves and some to do as they normally would. Separately, they asked other commuters to predict which would be more pleasant. People predicted that solitude would be nicer. The commuters who'd talked to someone reported a more positive journey, and no less productive a one. Part of the reason for the wrong prediction, the researchers found, was that people underestimated how interested others were in talking. They assumed the person next to them would prefer to be left alone. That person was assuming the same about them.

I should state the limits. Liu's experiments mostly involved brief messages and small gestures, and appreciation was measured soon afterwards. They don't show that every old friend wants a friendship revived. Epley and Schroeder's commuters were strangers, which is a different case from yours. What the two sets of studies share is a direction. When people guess how welcome their approach will be, they guess too low.

You can check this from your own side, and I find it more convincing than any study. Think of the last time someone you'd lost touch with got in touch with you. It might have been a message from an old school friend, or a card from a former neighbour, or a

call from a cousin. Try to remember what you felt when you saw the name. I'd bet it wasn't "what a chore". I'd bet it was closer to pleasure, and that you told someone about it. "Guess who I heard from today." You probably thought well of them for doing it, and you certainly didn't think they were a nuisance.

Your friend is made the same way. The sigh you imagine when they see your name is something you've invented on their behalf, and it's unlike anything you've ever felt in their position.

One fair objection is that some people are overwhelmed, and a message really is one more thing. There's a simple answer, and chapter 12 builds it in. You can send a message that asks for nothing. "I walked past the sandwich place on Thursday and thought of you. Hope the new job's going well. No need to reply." Even the busiest person can receive that with nothing but pleasure, and most of them reply anyway.

"It's their turn"

Somewhere in your head there's a tally. You might not admit to keeping one, but you could tell me, for most of your friends, who got in touch last and who usually does the arranging. When the tally says it's their turn, getting in touch feels like giving something away. It feels like admitting that you need them more than they need you.

I'd like to look at what the tally is for and whether it's doing its job.

Its purpose is to protect you from one-sided friendships. That's a real thing. There are people who take, who only appear when they want something, and who'd let you do all the work for ever. A rough sense of whether effort flows both ways is a sensible thing to have.

But the tally measures only one kind of effort, which is who starts things. It treats starting things as the sign of caring. Those aren't the same. Think about your own friends. Some people are starters. They organise, suggest and send the first message, and they do it with everyone because that's how they are. Other people almost never start anything and are warm, loyal and delighted to be asked. They'd drive two hours to help you move. They remember your mother's name and ask after her. They don't initiate, out of shyness or habit or the same hesitation this book is about. If you wait for a non-starter to start, you'll wait indefinitely, and you'll have concluded something false about how much they care.

I know of no research that sorts people into those two groups, so this is my observation. But I'd be surprised if you couldn't sort your own friends that way in a minute or two. You may also notice that the non-starters include some of the people you'd most like to see.

The Aknin and Sandstrom finding from chapter 3 bears on this. If fewer than a third of willing people will send a message to an old friend even with everything made easy, then starting is hard for most people. If you're able to do it, you have something most of them lack. Whoever finds it least hard might as well be the one to do it, as the better cook in a house tends to do more of the cooking. There's no indignity in that.

The honest objection runs like this. "So I'm supposed to do all the work for ever, and never mind whether they'd ever bother with me?" No. There's a better test of a friendship than whose turn it is, and it has two parts. When you do get in touch, are they glad? And when you arrange something, do they turn up and seem pleased to be there? If the answer to both is yes, the friendship is mutual in every way that matters. You put in the first thirty seconds, and they match everything after. They listen and laugh, and they remember and care. The first thirty seconds is a small price for that.

If the answer is no, that's different. Suppose your messages get short replies, and plans get cancelled or never quite fixed. Suppose that when you do meet, the interest runs one way. Then you've learned something true, and you learned it by making the first move. The tally could never have told you. Chapter 14 suggests a simple limit. Make two good attempts, some weeks apart, and then let it rest without a grudge.

What the tally mostly protects is pride. Pride does no harm when it's kept in proportion. A friendship is a lot to pay for it, though. Your friend isn't at home thinking that you've surrendered by messaging first. Nobody keeps score of that. If they think about it at all, it'll be "I'm so glad they got in touch, I've been meaning to for ages."

"It's been too long"

There's a point in every lapsed friendship where the gap itself becomes the obstacle. At two months you could have sent "lunch next week?" and it would have been nothing. At fourteen months it seems to need a preamble. You'd have to acknowledge the silence, explain it and apologise for it. You start drafting in your head. "I'm so sorry I've been useless at keeping in touch, things have been mad, I kept meaning to message and then so much time had gone by that..." It's exhausting before you've typed a word, so you don't.

The gap produces embarrassment, and the embarrassment makes the gap longer. Next month it'll be fifteen months, and the imagined preamble will be longer still.

Aknin and Sandstrom's studies offer a clue to what's happening. They found that people were less willing to contact old friends who felt more like strangers to them. Time does that. A friend you haven't spoken to for a year has drifted, in your mind, some way towards the category of people you don't know. You don't know what their days are like any more, or whether the job turned out well, or what's happened with their father's health. Approaching them starts to feel like approaching a stranger, and chapter 4 described how reluctant people are to do that.

But your friend isn't a stranger. Two minutes into a conversation you'd find that the old ease was intact, as it is when you run into someone in the street. The sense of strangeness comes from the silence, and the person hasn't changed. Most people have had the experience of meeting an old friend after years and finding it was

as if no time had passed. People say it with surprise every time, which suggests that the expectation of awkwardness is reliably wrong.

Here are three things about the gap that I think are true and that the embarrassment hides. These are my own reasoning.

The first is that the gap belongs to both of you. You're mortified about your fourteen months of silence. Your friend has been silent for the same fourteen months. If anyone is owed an apology, each of you owes the other the same one, and they cancel out. Your friend knows this perfectly well. If you open with a long apology, the most likely reply is "don't be daft, I've been just as bad".

The second is that long gaps are normal and everyone knows it. Adult friendships run like this. People change jobs, have children, move and go through bad patches, and contact lapses for a year or three. Hardly anyone past thirty has a record of unbroken contact with anybody outside their household. Your friend won't read a fourteen-month gap as an insult. They'll read it as life, because that's what their own gaps with other people have been.

The third is that the explanation you think you owe isn't wanted. Imagine receiving two messages from an old friend. One says, "I'm so sorry for being rubbish, I've been meaning to get in touch for ages, things have been really hectic and I feel terrible about it." The other says, "I walked past that sandwich place today and thought of you. How are you?" The first makes you do work. You have to reassure them. The second is a pleasure to get. It carries all the information that matters, which is that they thought of you warmly.

So what I'd suggest is that you don't mention the gap, or that you give it one light clause at most. "It's been far too long" is plenty. Then go straight to the present, with what made you think of them and how they are. Chapter 12 has examples.

One objection is that it's been much longer than fourteen months. "It's been eleven years. We were close at university and I haven't spoken to her since her wedding." The same reasoning holds, and chapter 4 suggests the pleasure on the other end may be greater, because the surprise is greater. An old friend from eleven years ago who writes two warm lines has done something lovely. You might not pick the friendship back up. Lives diverge. But the message itself will almost certainly be welcome, and you'll have found out.

There's a last thing to weigh, and I say it without wishing to alarm you. The gap only ever goes in one direction. There won't be a future date when fourteen months has become a more comfortable number. If it feels too long now, the message will never be easier to send than it is today.

What the wait protects you from

Of the four reasons in chapter 2, the last was protection, and it's the one people are least likely to say out loud. While you don't get in touch, nothing can go wrong. The friendship stays in a kind of suspension, where it might still be as good as ever. A message puts that to the test. It might come back warm. It might come back as "Hi! Good to hear from you, all fine here, mad busy, hope you're well x", and you'd know what that meant. Or it might not come back at all.

I think this fear deserves respect, because rejection hurts. People who say it's silly to be scared of a text message have forgotten what it's like to send one that matters and watch the screen. So let me look at what the risk is.

Start with how likely the bad outcome is. Chapters 3 and 4 covered part of this. People underestimate how welcome their contact will be. There's another line of research about what people think of us after they've talked to us. Erica Boothby, Gus Cooney, Gillian Sandstrom and Margaret Clark ran a set of studies in which pairs of people talked and then each rated how much they liked the other and how much they thought the other liked them. People consistently underestimated how much their conversation partner liked them and enjoyed their company. The researchers called it the liking gap. They found it between strangers meeting in a laboratory, between first-year students getting to know the others in their hall of residence, and between members of the public at a workshop. Among the students it lasted for several months.

Those studies were about new acquaintances, so they don't speak directly to your friend from the old office. But consider what they suggest about your private estimate of how much people like you. That estimate is what drives the fear of a flat reply, and if it's like most people's it's set too low. Your friend spent six years of Thursdays with you by choice. The estimate that says they might not want to hear from you comes from the same faculty that tells people at workshops they've made a poor impression when they've made a good one.

Next, look at what the bad outcome would be. Suppose you do get the brisk, busy reply. It's a little deflating. It may also mean exactly what it says. They're busy, they were pleased to hear from you, and they answered in the ninety seconds they had. People's replies are governed far more by their week than by their feelings about you. A short reply on a Tuesday is weak evidence about a friendship. You can take it at face value, leave it a few weeks, and try once more with a specific suggestion.

Suppose you get no reply at all. That stings, and chapter 14 deals with it. But think about where it leaves you compared with now. At the moment you have a friendship you're not using, and a small recurring pang whenever you pass the name. After a message with no reply, you'd have a friendship you're not using, and some information. Nothing has been taken from you that you currently have. The suspended state feels like it's preserving something, but what it preserves is a possibility you never draw on.

And consider the cost of the protection. The wait protects you from a small chance of a mild disappointment. To do that it rules out the large chance of getting your friend back. You pay that price in full

every time, with every person, and it adds up to the quiet described in chapter 1. If you made this trade once it might be reasonable. But the wait is a standing policy, and under it you've given up most of the friendships you could have to avoid an occasional sting.

I'm not going to tell you the sting won't come. Send enough messages and one will fall flat. What I'd ask you to notice is that you already know how to get over a message that falls flat. It takes an evening. The quiet goes on for much longer than that and doesn't ease by being left alone.

How the quiet keeps itself going

Up to now I've written as if the wait were a series of separate decisions, made name by name. It doesn't stay that way. When the wait has gone on long enough with enough people, it changes the person doing the waiting, and the change makes the next first move harder. This chapter is about that loop. I think it's the most important thing in the book to understand.

The research comes mainly from John Cacioppo and Louise Hawkley, who spent many years studying loneliness. They're careful to define it. Loneliness, in their words, is not simply being alone. It's perceived isolation, the feeling that your connections fall short of what you need. You can have it in a crowd and lack it in a lighthouse.

Their central finding is that loneliness alters how people process the social world. In their reviews they report that feeling isolated heightens vigilance for social threat. A lonely person becomes quicker to notice signs of rejection and more likely to read an ambiguous signal as a bad one. They describe biases in attention and memory, and a tendency to expect poor treatment and then find confirmation of it. They call the result self-protective and paradoxically self-defeating. It makes a rough kind of sense. If you feel you're outside the group, it pays to be alert to hostility. But the alertness makes you warier, and other people respond to wariness by keeping their own distance. That confirms the expectation, and the loop closes.

You can see how this joins up with the earlier chapters. Every misreading described there gets stronger as the quiet deepens. After a sociable month, a friend's slow reply looks like a busy friend. After three months of not seeing anyone, the same slow reply looks like proof. The brisk message that chapter 7 said to take at face value becomes impossible to take at face value. The tally gets more precise and more bitter. "Nobody ever rings me" starts to feel like an observed fact about the world, when it's partly a result of your own silence, which has been matched by theirs.

I should be careful not to borrow the wrong model here. This isn't like a drug, and nothing is being craved. But there's a structural likeness worth pointing out. Each time you pass the name and don't get in touch, you're spared a small discomfort, the little dread of composing the message and awaiting the reply. That relief is real and immediate. And each time, the thing causing the dread gets a little stronger. The gap is longer, the quiet is deeper and you're more vigilant. So the habit relieves, moment by moment, a discomfort that it's building up over months.

There's a hopeful side to this, and it comes from research on what helps. Christopher Masi, working with Hawkley and Cacioppo and another colleague, pooled the studies of interventions meant to reduce loneliness. These fell into four kinds. Some taught social skills, some provided social support, some increased opportunities for contact, and some addressed what the authors call maladaptive social cognition, meaning the habits of thought I've been describing. Among the properly randomised studies, the last kind was the most successful.

I find that encouraging, for two reasons. The first is that it says the usual problem isn't a lack of skill. People who wait tend to believe they're bad at friendship. The evidence points elsewhere. They're mostly fine at it, and they've been misreading the signals. The second is that thoughts can be checked against facts, and that's what this book has been doing since chapter 3.

The quiet also has a way of hiding itself, which the subtitle calls settling in as normal. You adjust. The empty weekend stops registering as empty. You build a life that works around it, with box sets, long walks and a good relationship with the radio. You begin to describe yourself differently. "I'm quite a private person." "I've never needed many people." That may be true of you, and the next chapter takes it seriously. But it's also what the loop would say if it could speak. The best test I know is the pang. If you still feel it when you pass the name in the list, then the quiet is a habit that has gone on long enough to look like your nature.

One more fact, given once and without drama. Julianne Holt-Lunstad and colleagues pooled the studies that followed people over years. Loneliness, social isolation and living alone each went with a higher risk of early death, by roughly a quarter to a third. The authors describe that as comparable with well-established risk factors. These are observational studies, and ill health can cause isolation as well as the other way round. I don't mention it to frighten you. I mention it because people who wait often think of their social life as a luxury, the thing you see to once everything important is done. The evidence is that it belongs with the important things.

"I'm fine on my own"

Some readers will have bristled at the last chapter. You like your own company. You find people tiring. A weekend with no plans is your idea of a good weekend. You've no wish to be told you're secretly lonely, or to be pushed into a busier life than you want.

I agree with you, and I'll say so without any hedging. Solitude that you choose is one of the good things in life. Some people need a great deal of it, and they're not broken. If you see as much of other people as you'd like, feel no pang about the ones you don't see, and would call your life full, then you don't have the habit this book is about. Nothing in it applies to you, and you can stop reading with a clear conscience.

The distinction that matters is the one Cacioppo and Hawkley draw. Being alone is a fact about your diary. Loneliness is a gap between the contact you have and the contact you want. A person who wants little and has little is content. A person who wants a moderate amount and has little is lonely, however self-sufficient they look. How many evenings you spend by yourself doesn't settle which you are. What settles it is whether something in you would like it to be otherwise.

I'd suggest an honest check in place of a label. When you passed the name in the list, was there a pang? When a friend does ring, and you talk for forty minutes, do you put the phone down feeling better than when you picked it up? When a plan you'd half dreaded

turns out to be a good evening, do you think afterwards that you should do that more often? If so, you want more contact than you're getting, whatever your temperament.

The label "introvert" can work against people here. It describes something real. Some people do find company more draining than others, and need more time alone to recover. But needing time to recover from company is quite different from not needing company. Most people who call themselves introverts have a few people they love to see, in small numbers, in quiet places, for a limited time. That's a preference about quantity and setting. It doesn't mean preferring nothing. If the wait has reduced your contact to below even that modest level, then your temperament isn't being respected. The label is being used to explain a shortfall.

Epley and Schroeder's commuters, from chapter 4, are relevant here. People predicted they'd enjoy the journey more in solitude. When they talked to someone, they enjoyed it more than those who kept to themselves. The summary I read doesn't say whether this held for the quieter participants in particular, so I won't claim that it did. But the general point stands. Our forecasts about how much we'll enjoy company tend to run low. "I'd rather stay in" is a forecast. It's sometimes right. It's wrong often enough to be worth testing.

If you're on the quieter side, what I'd take from this is that the first moves you make can be shaped to suit you. You needn't throw a party. You can ring one person. You can suggest a walk, which is side by side and has a natural end. You can see people for ninety minutes and go home. The rule in chapter 13 says nothing about how much company to have. It says that when you think of

someone, you tell them. A person who does that and then sees one friend a fortnight, on terms they find comfortable, isn't lonely. A person with the same temperament who does nothing may well be.

So you may be right that you're fine on your own, and you're the only one who can know. Answer it by the pang, though. The label can't tell you.

The man in the paper shop

So far this book has been about friends, the people whose names are in your phone. There's another kind of contact that people in the quiet tend to overlook, and it's the easiest place to begin.

Gillian Sandstrom and Elizabeth Dunn studied what sociologists call weak ties. These are the people you know slightly. Think of the man in the paper shop, the woman you nod to at the bus stop, or the neighbour two doors down. The colleague from another floor is one, and so is the person who's always at the pool at the same time as you. In one study they had students keep track of their interactions with classmates. On days when a student talked to more classmates than was usual for them, they reported being happier and feeling a greater sense of belonging. Two further studies widened the net to all daily interactions, close and slight alike. Interactions with weak ties were again related to social and emotional wellbeing, alongside those with close friends and family.

These are studies of what goes with what, day by day, and they can't prove that the chats caused the better days. But they fit ordinary experience. Most people know the small lift of an exchange with someone who recognises them. "Morning. The usual? Did you get that fence sorted?" It takes forty seconds. You walk out feeling slightly more like a person who belongs somewhere.

For someone in the quiet, weak ties have three things going for them.

They're low risk. If you say "cold one today" to the man in the paper shop and he grunts, you've lost nothing. No friendship is at stake, and there's no gap to explain and no tally.

They're available daily. You might only have four or five lapsed friends to contact, but you pass a dozen slight acquaintances every week.

And they're practice. This matters more than it sounds. Chapter 8 described how the quiet makes a person warier and quicker to see rejection. The best correction for that is a run of small exchanges that go fine. Each one is a piece of evidence against the loop. People are, on the whole, pleased to be spoken to, and you're perfectly able to do it. After a fortnight of saying a sentence more than you need to in shops and lifts, sending a message to your friend from the old office feels less like stepping off a cliff.

Aknin and Sandstrom found something close to this in their final study, which chapter 13 describes. What got more people to contact an old friend was a few minutes of practice on easier targets first. Trying to persuade them that it would go well hadn't worked.

There's also a longer game here. Friendships are made out of time. Jeffrey Hall studied people who had recently moved, and first-year students, and looked at how acquaintances turn into friends. The number of hours people spent together was associated with how close they became, and time spent on leisure activities together predicted closeness too. It wasn't only hours. The kind of talk mattered as well. But the raw material was time in each other's company. Every friend you have was once a weak tie who got enough hours. The neighbour two doors down could become a

friend after three years of chats over the hedge and an eventual cup of tea. That only happens if somebody says something over the hedge to begin with.

If you're not ready to message the name in the list, start here.

Tomorrow, say one more sentence than the transaction needs, to one person you half know. Ask the man in the paper shop how his week's been. Tell the neighbour that her roses have done well.

You're not trying to make a friend. You're showing yourself, in the smallest way available, that a first move is survivable and usually pleasant. That's the fact the wait has been keeping from you.

A voice does more than a thumbs up

You might say that you are in touch with people, in a way. You see their photographs. You put a heart on the picture of the new kitchen and a laughing face under the joke. You know they went to Portugal. It feels like a form of keeping up.

I'd look hard at that feeling, because I think it works as a substitute for contact. When you look at your friend's holiday pictures, you come away with the sense of having caught up. You know their news. But they don't know yours, and they may not know you looked. Nothing has passed between you. My view is that this kind of watching quietly takes the edge off the pang that might otherwise have got you to pick up the phone. You feel you've kept up, and so you don't ring. This is my interpretation and I haven't seen it tested.

On the question of which kinds of contact do the most good, there is research, and it goes against most people's instincts.

Amit Kumar and Nicholas Epley ran a field experiment in which people got back in touch with an old friend. Some were assigned to do it by phone and others by email. Beforehand, people expected the phone call to be more awkward. It wasn't. The calls were no more awkward than the emails, and the people who'd talked felt a stronger bond afterwards. In laboratory studies, strangers got to know each other by video, by voice alone, or by typed chat. The pattern was the same. Any channel that included the voice created more sense of connection than text did, with no extra

awkwardness. People's expectations pointed the wrong way, and the researchers note that this leads them to choose the channel that does less for them.

So we avoid ringing because we expect it to be awkward, and the expectation is wrong. We choose text because it feels safe, and text gives less. It's the same pattern as in chapters 3 to 7, applied to the choice of channel.

I'm not saying a message is worthless. A message is a fine first move, and for a friend you haven't spoken to in fourteen months it's probably the right one. It lets them reply in their own time. The point is what the message is for. It's there to open the way to a voice or a face. It shouldn't be where the contact stays. An exchange of four friendly texts, ending in "we must catch up properly soon!", leaves you exactly where the thumbs up left you fourteen months ago.

There's a fair objection about manners. "Nobody rings unannounced any more. It feels intrusive. People see an incoming call and assume someone's died." That's true in many circles, and it's easy to work with. Send a message that sets up the call. "Are you around for a ring on Thursday evening? I'd love to hear how it's all going." Now the call is expected and welcome. With parents, older relatives and some old friends, you can simply ring. They belong to the generation that thinks a phone is for that.

If you find calls hard, there are halfway houses. A voice note carries your voice without needing the other person to be free. A walk together has the advantage that you're side by side, so

silences are comfortable and nobody has to hold eye contact across a table. A short visit with a stated end works well too. "I'm passing on Saturday morning, could I drop in for half an hour?"

The title of this book says "ring", and I mean it fairly literally. Forty minutes on the phone with someone who knows you does something that no quantity of hearts and thumbs can do. You hear them laugh. You say something you hadn't planned to say. You find out what's going on with them, which might be quite different from the photographs. When you put the phone down, the friendship is switched on again.

What to say

People stall at this point. They're persuaded, they open the conversation, and then they stare at the empty box for ten minutes and close it again. So here's a plain way to write the message. None of it is research. It's what I think works, for reasons I'll give.

A good first message after a long gap has up to three parts.

Start with why you thought of them, and make it specific. "I walked past the sandwich place on Thursday." "They played that awful song from the Christmas party on the radio." "I finally read the book you kept telling me about." A specific prompt does two things. It explains why you're writing today and not some other day, so the message doesn't seem to come from nowhere. And it carries the real news, which is that they have a place in your head.

Then something brief about now. "How's the new job turned out?" "I hope your dad's doing better." One question is enough. Make it one they can answer in a line if they're busy.

The third part is optional, and it's a concrete suggestion. "Are you free for a coffee on Saturday the 14th? I could come to you." Or the setting up of a call, as in the last chapter.

Put together, that's three sentences.

"I walked past the sandwich place on Thursday and thought of you. How's the new job turned out? If you're free on Saturday the 14th I'd love to buy you a coffee and hear about it."

Here's what I'd leave out.

Leave out the long apology for the gap. Chapter 6 gave the reasons. "It's been far too long" is the most you need.

Leave out the account of your own news. It turns the message into a newsletter, and it can wait for the conversation.

Leave out anything that gives them a job. "We should really sort out a reunion with the old team" hands them a project. They'll mean to reply when they've thought about it, and they never will.

And above all leave out "we must catch up soon". That sentence has ended more friendships than any quarrel. It sounds like a plan and contains none. It lets both people feel that something has been arranged. The cure is a date. "Are you free on the 14th?" can be answered with yes, no, or "not then, but the 21st?". Any of those answers moves things on. "We must catch up" usually gets "definitely!", and then another fourteen months go by.

If you want to ask nothing of them, because you know they're stretched or grieving or ill, say so. "No need to reply, I just wanted you to know I was thinking of you." A message like that makes no demand, and people remember getting it.

When you do get to talk, don't stay in the shallows the whole time. Michael Kardas, Amit Kumar and Nicholas Epley ran a long series of experiments on conversation. They had people discuss either light topics or deeper and more personal ones, and predict beforehand how it would go. People expected the deeper conversations to be much more awkward than they turned out to be. They also underestimated how much the other person would

care about what they had to say. After having both kinds, people felt more connected to the partner they'd had the deeper conversation with. Most of those pairs were strangers. The researchers found that with close friends and family people's predictions were more accurate, so the gap may be smaller with your friend from the old office. Still, after a long silence there's a pull towards keeping it all to holidays and house prices. If something real has happened to you in the fourteen months, say so. "It's been a rough year, to be honest. Mum's not been well." Usually the other person answers with something real of their own, and the conversation improves from there.

Lastly, there's the reply you give when they write back and you feel the old awkwardness about what to say next. Answer what they said, and move towards the date. You're not trying to be brilliant in writing. The aim is to end up in the same room.

The decision

Up to now I've asked you to notice things and perhaps to speak to the man in the paper shop. This chapter asks you to decide something. It comes this late on purpose. Without the last twelve chapters, the rule below would be one more piece of advice to be sociable, and you've had plenty of that.

The decision is this. **When I think of someone, I get in touch that day.**

The rule is small because its size is what makes it work. It isn't a resolution to be a better friend. It doesn't set a target for nights out. It takes something that already happens to you several times a week, which is a person crossing your mind, and attaches one action to it. It might be a song or a street, or a name in a list on the way to the plumber. At the moment those thoughts arrive, produce a pang and go away. Under the rule each one becomes a message, sent the same day, in the three sentences of chapter 12. "Heard that song today and thought of you. How are you doing?"

It has four parts.

The warm-up. Start with the easy ones. In the last of Aknin and Sandstrom's studies, the researchers tried to get more people to message an old friend. Earlier attempts to change people's attitudes hadn't worked. What worked was practice. One group spent three minutes sending messages to current friends and acquaintances, people they were already in touch with. The other group spent three minutes browsing social media. Afterwards

everyone had the chance to message an old friend they'd lost touch with. In the social media group, 31 per cent did. In the practice group, 53 per cent did. So before you message the name in the list, message three people you spoke to last month. Say anything friendly. It takes three minutes and it makes the harder message more likely to get sent.

The rule itself. For the next month, every time someone comes to mind and you feel the pang or the warmth, send the message that day. Don't weigh whose turn it is. Don't check how long it's been. You thought of them, and that's the reason to write. If it's late at night, write it and send it in the morning.

One arrangement a week. Messages open the way, but chapter 11 said they shouldn't be where contact stays. So once a week, make one first move towards hearing a voice or seeing a face. Suggest a date for a coffee, set up a call, or ask a neighbour in for tea. One a week is modest. Over a year it's fifty occasions that otherwise wouldn't have happened.

The weak ties. Keep up the extra sentence in shops and over hedges, from chapter 10. It costs nothing and it keeps you in practice.

Plans in the form "when this happens, then I'll do that" are well supported. Peter Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran pooled 94 tests of them and found they made people a good deal more likely to follow through. Here are three, and you can adjust the wording.

When someone comes to mind and I feel the pang, then I'll send them three sentences before the day is out.

When I catch myself thinking "it's their turn" or "it's been too long", then I'll take that as the signal to write.

When someone says "we must catch up", then I'll reply with a date.

The second plan takes the thoughts that have been stopping you and treats them as the cue to act. "It's their turn" is what the wait sounds like from inside. Hearing it in your head is the most reliable sign you'll get that there's a message worth sending.

Here's what to expect, and I'll be careful, because I can't promise you an outcome. Most messages will get a warm reply, often quicker and warmer than you predicted. Several will contain some version of "I've been meaning to get in touch for ages", which is chapter 3 confirmed. Some replies will be slow. A few messages will get a brisk answer or none, and the next chapter deals with those. Not every revived contact will become a revived friendship. Some people you'll exchange news with once and leave it there, and that's fine. What I'd expect after two or three months is a phone with more conversations in it. I'd expect a diary with a few more entries, and a weaker sense that nobody ever rings. Some of them will have started ringing, because people tend to ring those who've recently rung them.

No reply, busy friends and starting from nothing

The rule is simple to follow. Some situations make it harder, and I should be plain about them.

No reply. You sent a warm message and a week has gone by with nothing. The loop from chapter 8 will offer you an explanation at once, and it will be the unkind one. Here are the more likely ones. They saw it at a bad moment, meant to reply properly, and it slid down the screen. Your number isn't in their new phone. They're in the middle of something hard that you don't know about. The message embarrassed them slightly because they feel bad about the gap, and they're putting off answering for exactly the reasons you put off writing. None of these is about you. My suggestion is a rule of two. Wait three or four weeks, then send one more message, light and with no reproach in it. "Thinking of you again. No pressure at all, but the coffee offer stands." If that gets nothing either, let it rest, without a grudge and without deleting the number. You've done what could be done. Some of these come back to life a year later when the other person's circumstances change. And you've lost nothing you had.

The friend who's always busy. They reply warmly, they'd love to meet, and they can never do any date. After a third "this month is mad", it's tempting to read it as a brush-off. Sometimes it is. More often they're disorganised, or overwhelmed, or have small children. Make it as easy as it can be made. Offer to come to them. Offer forty minutes. Offer to join something they're already doing, like the walk to the park with the pram. If everything fails, fall

back on the phone, which asks less. And apply the test from chapter 5. If they seem glad and would see you if they could, that counts for something.

The one-sided friendship. Chapter 5 promised a limit. If you've made the first move several times, and the replies are short, the plans always fall through from their end, and they show little interest when you do meet, then accept what that shows you. You needn't make an announcement or have a falling-out over it. Put your effort where it's returned. It's one of the benefits of making first moves freely. You find out quite quickly which friendships are alive, and you stop wondering about the rest.

Starting from nothing. Some readers have few names to ring. You may have moved for work, or been widowed, or given years to caring for someone. Retirement may have taken the daily contact away, or your old friendships may have belonged to a marriage that ended. The rule can't produce names that aren't there. Weak ties matter most here, along with Hall's finding that friendship is made of hours. You need settings where the same people turn up repeatedly, so that hours can build up. A weekly class, a choir, a walking group or a regular volunteering shift would do it. One-off events rarely work, because you meet people once and never again. The NHS suggests joining a group or class built around something you enjoy, and says you could ask to go along and just watch the first time if you're nervous. It also suggests volunteering, and it describes something called social prescribing. Your GP may be able to refer you to a link worker whose job is to help you find local groups and support. That's worth asking about, especially if you don't know where to start.

Lapses. You'll have weeks when you go quiet again. A bad patch at work, a cold, a dip in mood, and the thoughts of people come and go without a message. This proves nothing about you or the rule. The loop in chapter 8 is strongest when you're tired or low, and those are the weeks it wins. When you notice, don't try to make up for lost time. Do the three-minute warm-up and send one message. Then you're following the rule again.

When a book isn't enough. Please talk to a GP, or in England refer yourself to NHS talking therapies, if any of these sounds like you.

- You've had a low mood for more than two weeks, or you're struggling to cope. That's the NHS's own threshold for seeking help.
- The fear of contact is general and strong, so that phone calls, conversations and being observed all bring dread. That may be social anxiety, which the NHS says often doesn't go away without treatment.
- The loneliness follows a bereavement and isn't easing.
- You're having thoughts of harming yourself. Get help the same day, through NHS 111, an urgent GP appointment, or 999 in an emergency.

The research on reducing loneliness in chapter 8 found that the approaches which worked best were those that addressed people's habits of thought. Therapists know how to do that. If you can't shift the loop alone, that's a good reason to get help with it. It doesn't mean there's anything wrong with you.

The name in the list again

Here's the scene from chapter 1 again. It's an example of how it might go, and I'm not promising it.

It's Sunday afternoon, about four. You're looking for the plumber's number, and on the way down the list your thumb passes the name of your friend from the old office.

The pang comes, and with it the old thoughts, right on time. It's been over a year, they haven't been in touch either, and it's their turn. You recognise them now. They're the cue.

You open the conversation. "We must catch up soon!" and the thumbs up, fourteen months old. You type underneath it.

"I walked past the sandwich place on Thursday and thought of you. It's been far too long. How's the new job turned out? If you're free on Saturday the 14th I'd love to buy you a coffee."

You read it once. Your thumb hovers, because understanding the fear doesn't make it vanish. Then you press send, put the phone face down, and ring the plumber.

Forty minutes later it buzzes. "Oh I'm SO glad you messaged. I've been meaning to for months and felt worse about it every week. The job is a long story. Can't do the 14th, but are you free on the 21st? I'll come to you."

On the 21st you sit in a café for two and a half hours. The job is indeed a long story. So is their father's health, which you knew nothing about, and so is your own year, which you hadn't planned to talk about and do. At the end they say, "Why did we leave it so long?" and neither of you has a good answer. You put the next date in your phones before you leave the table.

They won't all go like that. Some messages will get a line back and no more. One or two will get nothing. You'll have quiet months again, and you'll need the three-minute warm-up more than once. But the friendships you restart will last a good deal longer than the sting from the ones that didn't work.

Your friend was never waiting for a better message or a shorter gap. They were waiting for the same thing you were, which was for the other one to go first. One of you had to, and you're the one who knows that now.

If you do one thing after closing this book, pick up your phone and send three friendly messages to people you spoke to last month. After that, find the name you thought of while you were reading this, and write to them.

Notes

This book gives general information. It isn't medical or psychological advice, and it's no substitute for a doctor or therapist who knows your situation.

I've kept sources out of the chapters where I could so they read easily. Here they are by chapter, with the limits I'm aware of. Unless I say otherwise, I read the published summary of each paper and not the full text. I checked each paper for a retraction notice in September 2026 and found none. Where a chapter isn't listed, it rests on my own reasoning. That includes chapters 1, 2, 5, 6 and 15, the message in chapter 12 and the rule in chapter 13. The NHS pages were read in September 2026. They're written for England or the UK, and services differ elsewhere. Most of the research was done in North America and the UK, much of it with students or online volunteers, and much of it concerns strangers or brief contacts. Carrying it over to long-standing friendships is my step throughout.

Before you start. The two-week threshold and the routes to help are from the NHS page "Get help with loneliness". The remarks on social anxiety are from the NHS page "Social anxiety (social phobia)".

Chapter 3. Aknin and Sandstrom, "People are surprisingly hesitant to reach out to old friends", *Communications Psychology* 2, 2024, article 34. I read the full text. Seven studies with 2,458 participants in total. In studies 3 and 4 fewer than a third of participants sent a message. In study 5, 288 people rated their willingness to do eight

everyday activities. Contacting an old friend and talking to a stranger both averaged 4.6 on a seven-point scale. The authors report that willingness to contact an old friend was lower than for all but two of the other activities, those two being booking a medical appointment and sorting a bag of coins, and that not all the differences were statistically significant.

Chapter 4. Liu, Rim, Min and Min, "The surprise of reaching out: appreciated more than we think", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 124, 2023, pages 754 to 771. Epley and Schroeder, "Mistakenly seeking solitude", *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 143, 2014, pages 1980 to 1999. The commuters were in the Chicago area, and I haven't looked into how well the finding has held up elsewhere.

Chapter 7. Boothby, Cooney, Sandstrom and Clark, "The liking gap in conversations: do people like us more than we think?", *Psychological Science* 29, 2018, pages 1742 to 1756. The studies concern people getting acquainted, not established friends.

Chapter 8. Cacioppo and Hawkley, "Perceived social isolation and cognition", *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 13, 2009, pages 447 to 454. Hawkley and Cacioppo, "Loneliness matters: a theoretical and empirical review of consequences and mechanisms", *Annals of Behavioral Medicine* 40, 2010, pages 218 to 227. Both are reviews by the same research group. Masi, Chen, Hawkley and Cacioppo, "A meta-analysis of interventions to reduce loneliness", *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 15, 2011, pages 219 to 266. The authors note that the less rigorous studies showed larger effects than the randomised ones. Holt-Lunstad, Smith, Baker, Harris and Stephenson, "Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for

mortality: a meta-analytic review", *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 10, 2015, pages 227 to 237. The odds ratios were 1.29 for social isolation, 1.26 for loneliness and 1.32 for living alone. The likeness to a habit that relieves a discomfort it builds is my interpretation.

Chapter 9. The distinction between being alone and being lonely is from Hawkley and Cacioppo 2010. The check by the pang is mine.

Chapter 10. Sandstrom and Dunn, "Social interactions and well-being: the surprising power of weak ties", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 40, 2014, pages 910 to 922. Hall, "How many hours does it take to make a friend?", *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 36, 2019, pages 1278 to 1296. Two studies, with 355 adults who had recently moved and 112 first-year students. Both papers report associations and can't show cause.

Chapter 11. Kumar and Epley, "It's surprisingly nice to hear you: misunderstanding the impact of communication media can lead to suboptimal choices of how to connect with others", *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 150, 2021, pages 595 to 607. What I say about watching friends on social media as a substitute for contact is my view and I haven't looked for research on it.

Chapter 12. Kardas, Kumar and Epley, "Overly shallow? Miscalibrated expectations create a barrier to deeper conversation", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 122, 2022, pages 367 to 398. Most of the experiments paired strangers. Predictions were more accurate for conversations with close friends, family and partners.

Chapter 13. The practice study is study 7 in Aknin and Sandstrom 2024. There were 194 participants, recruited on a university campus in the UK. Those in the practice group sent messages to about three current friends or acquaintances on average. Plans in "when, then" form are from Gollwitzer and Sheeran, "Implementation intentions and goal achievement: a meta-analysis of effects and processes", *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 38, 2006, pages 69 to 119. The rule and its four parts haven't been tested together, and what I say to expect is my expectation and not a finding.

Chapter 14. The suggestions about groups, volunteering and social prescribing, and the advice on when to seek help, are from the NHS page "Get help with loneliness". The rule of two is mine.