

Your turn to text

A short book about letting friendships fade through small
delays that nobody intended

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First edition

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

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Before you start

This is a short book and you can read it in two or three sittings. It's about one habit, which is leaving a friend's message for a better moment, and then a better one, until the moment has gone and so, a little, has the friend. Nobody decides this. You like the person. You meant to reply. You still mean to. And the friendship is thinner than it was a year ago, and thinner than it will be next year, because of a delay that felt like nothing each time it happened.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that the delay makes sense from the inside. The message deserved a proper answer, you didn't have the time or the head for one, and a quick line felt like short-changing someone you care about. The second is that the proper answer is the problem. It's a standard, not a task, and standards don't get done, they get postponed. Meanwhile the friend on the other end sees the same silence you'd see, and reads it the way you'd read it. There's research on how much people appreciate being contacted, on how friendships decay without contact and on what people make of a slow reply, and it points one way. The third is practical. Two lines today does the whole job. A better reply next month does none of it. Chapters 19 to 22 cover how, and none of it takes longer than a minute.

This book isn't about friendships you've ended on purpose, or people you've stepped back from because of how they treated you. A delay that's really a decision is a different thing, and you're allowed to make it. And if the problem isn't that you leave

messages but that nobody sends them, and you're waiting for other people to get in touch while the weeks go quiet, that's the earlier book *Ring* them first, which starts further back than this one.

Two cautions.

If you've stopped answering everyone, not just the friends who can wait, and it comes with feeling low most of the day for a fortnight or more, the NHS lists avoiding contact with friends among the symptoms of depression and says to see a GP. Do that first.

Messages can wait until you have.

If replying is hard because any contact makes you anxious, and you've been turning down invitations for years because of nerves rather than time, the earlier book *Go* anyway is about that, and chapter 23 here says a little more.

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

The message from Tuesday

It's Sunday evening and you're going through your phone with the vague intention of tidying it. There's a message from a friend. It came on Tuesday. It's a photo of a cake she made for her mum's seventieth, and two lines about how the weekend went, and a question about whether you're still thinking of coming up in October. You read it on Tuesday, in a queue, and you felt warm about it, and you thought, I'll reply properly tonight.

Tonight went. Wednesday you saw it again and thought, I'll do it at the weekend when I can give it some thought. It's now the weekend. You open the message. You type "Sorry for the slow reply, it's been a mad week". You look at that for a moment. It's a bad opening and October needs a real answer and the cake needs more than a thumbs up after five days. You delete what you typed. You'll do it tomorrow, when you're fresh. You put the phone down with a small heavy feeling, and you go and find something to watch.

Above her in the list there are ten others like it. A cousin. A friend from the old job who asked if you fancied a drink, three weeks ago. Someone whose birthday was on the ninth and it's now the fourteenth, so a message would have to mention that. A group you've muted. Each of them you like. Each of them you've meant to answer. You're not avoiding any of these people. You're avoiding the reply.

These are invented, but I'd guess yours are close. Some words. **The open message** is a message received and not answered. **The stretch** is how long it's been open. **The proper reply** is the answer

you're waiting to have time for, long enough and thoughtful enough to deserve the person. **The meaning-to** is the sentence "I've been meaning to reply", which is true, and which is where most of these friendships are living. **The surcharge** is what a reply seems to need once the stretch has grown, an apology, an explanation, a length to make up for it. **The turn** is the thought that it's the other person's go. **Two lines** is the reply this book is going to ask for. And **the thinning** is what happens to a friendship over a few years of this.

Before you go on, do one thing. Open your messages and count the open ones from people you like. Next to each, write the stretch. Days, weeks, or "I don't know". Then pick the oldest and don't reply to it yet. You'll want it in chapter 25.

Why leaving it makes sense

Nobody leaves a friend's message for a week because they've decided the friend can wait. They leave it because, at the moment it arrives, answering it is a small thing that needs more than they've got, and leaving it costs nothing visible. It's worth being honest about what the delay gives you, because a habit that gave you nothing wouldn't be a habit.

It gives you your attention back. The message arrived in a queue or a meeting or at the school gate, and answering it there would have meant doing two things badly. It promises a better reply later, one with the cake admired and October settled and a bit of your own news in return, which is what your friend deserves. It keeps the evening as it was. Nothing was on the list tonight, and a reply that does the friend justice would be a thing on the list. And it spares you a small awkwardness now, the awkwardness of a reply that's too short or too late or opens with sorry, by moving that awkwardness to a day when you'll handle it better.

Underneath those there's usually a set of beliefs, and they're the chapters that follow. That you'll reply properly later. That they know you're busy and will read the silence that way. That it's their turn anyway, or was, at some point. That it's been so long now that a reply would be strange. That a short reply would be worse than none. That the friendship will keep, and you'll pick up where you left off. That nobody meant anything by any of it. Each of those has something true in it, and each of them is doing the same job, which is making tonight's silence look free.

The delay is an answer to a real problem, which is that you have more people you care about than minutes you're prepared to give them at a bus stop. This book isn't going to tell you the problem isn't real. It's going to look at whether the proper reply is the only alternative to silence, because I don't think it is. Then it'll look at what the silence costs, from the other end, where it doesn't look like a busy week. And then it'll give you a way of answering a message that fits inside the queue, so that the friend gets something today and the proper reply can stop standing between you.

"I'll reply properly later"

The meaning-to is sincere. You do intend to reply. If someone asked you on Wednesday whether you were going to answer the message from Tuesday, you'd have said yes, of course, tonight or tomorrow, and you'd have meant it. So it's worth asking why a sincere intention held every day for a fortnight produces nothing.

Piers Steel, in a large review of research on putting things off, pooled hundreds of findings on what predicts it. Among the strongest and most consistent were how unpleasant the task was and how far off its deadline was. Both apply here in a way that's easy to miss. The proper reply isn't unpleasant in itself. What's unpleasant is the standard you've attached to it. A reply that admires the cake, answers October, gives some news back and reads as though you took your time is a small piece of writing, and writing to a standard is aversive in the way a form is aversive, even when you love the person you're writing to. And there's no deadline. A message from a friend never falls due. Nothing happens on day seven. So a task that's mildly unpleasant with no deadline sits at the bottom of every day's list, and every day it's there, the stretch grows and the standard grows with it.

This is the part I want to be plain about, and it's my interpretation. The proper reply isn't a task you haven't done. It's a standard you've set for a task, and standards don't get done. They get postponed until the conditions are right, and the conditions are never right at a bus stop, or on a Wednesday night, or on the Sunday you'd set aside, because on Sunday you're tired. The earlier book *It can be done today* is about small admin that piles up for the same reason.

Messages from friends are the version of that pile that costs the most, because a form doesn't notice when you leave it and a friend does.

Here's the test. Ask what the proper reply would actually contain. Write it down as a list. Cake, October, something about your week, a question back. Then ask how long that takes to write badly. Two minutes. The proper reply, the one that would take twenty and needs a clear head, doesn't exist and never did. It's the two-minute reply with a standard attached that stops you writing it. Take the standard off and the reply is there, and the meaning-to can stop.

"They know I'm busy"

You're busy, and your friend knows you're busy, and so the silence, you assume, arrives at their end with a label on it. Busy. Not ignoring me. Not gone off me. Just busy. Which is what it is. The belief is that the meaning of your silence travels with it.

It doesn't. Yoram Kalman and Sheizaf Rafaeli looked at what people make of a slow reply in a setting where the stakes were clear. Managers evaluated job candidates who'd taken different lengths of time to answer an email, a day, two weeks, or silence for over a month. The slow replies were read as a violation of what was expected, and how the candidate was judged depended on how the delay was read. The researchers describe response time as a nonverbal cue, one of the few available in writing, and they define online silence in terms of the norms it breaks. That's a hiring study, not a friendship study, and I'm extending it. But the point it makes about writing is general. When you talk to someone, your busyness is visible. In a message, the only thing that arrives is the time it took, and time on its own has no label.

Think about how you read it from the other side. A friend takes nine days to answer something you sent. You don't think "busy" for nine days. You think busy for two, then you think nothing for three, then you wonder whether the thing you sent was somehow wrong, then you tell yourself not to be daft, and then you stop expecting a reply and adjust. Your friend does exactly this with your silence, with one difference. They can't see the week you had. They can see the stretch.

There's a further problem with "they know I'm busy". It's true of everyone. Your friend is busy too. So is the cousin, and the person from the old job. Busy isn't a fact about you that explains your silence. It's a fact about adults that explains everyone's, and if it were a good enough reason, nobody would ever hear from anyone. What distinguishes the friends who stay in your life from the ones who thin out isn't that some were less busy. It's that some of them, or you, answered anyway, in the time they had rather than the time the reply deserved.

I'm not saying your friend is hurt. Most of the time they're not, or not much. I'm saying the silence arrives without the label, and the friend supplies their own, and you don't get to choose what it says.

"It's their turn"

Somewhere in the stretch, the turn appears. You look at the open message and a thought surfaces that isn't quite a reason but works like one. They didn't reply to my last one for ages either. Or they never suggested a date after we said we'd meet. Or I did the last two. It isn't said out loud and it isn't held with much conviction. But it's there, and it makes tonight's silence feel like fairness instead of delay.

Look at what the turn is. A conversation between friends isn't a game with turns. Nobody's counting, and if somebody is, the count is always wrong, because each person remembers their own messages and forgets the other's. What the turn actually is, I think, is the delay dressed up. You've left a message for a week and something in you needs the week to have been reasonable, and "their turn" supplies that. It's a reason found after the fact for a silence that happened for no reason at all.

The trouble is that it works at both ends. Your friend, looking at their own phone, also has a turn. Theirs says that they sent the last message and it's been a fortnight, so it's yours. Both of you are right by your own count, and both counts leave the message open. Two people each waiting for the other's go is how a friendship falls silent without either of them ever deciding to let it, and each of them, if asked, would say the other one went quiet.

The earlier book *Ring them first* is about the version of this where the waiting has settled in for good, where nobody rings and the reader has stopped expecting anyone to, and it deals with the turn

at length. This book is about the earlier stage, where you still have the friends and the messages still arrive. At this stage the turn is easier to give up, because you can see what it's doing. It's the only belief in this book that's doing nothing for you at all. It doesn't save time. It doesn't promise a better reply. It just makes silence feel fair.

So drop it. Not by deciding to be the bigger person, which is the turn under another name. Just notice that the question "whose go is it" has no answer and never did, and that the only thing it's ever done is keep a message open. If a message is open, it's yours. If there's no message and you've thought of the person, that's yours too. The count is nobody's business, including yours.

"It's been too long now"

At some point the stretch crosses a line and a new belief takes over from the meaning-to. It's been too long. A reply now would be strange. It would draw attention to the gap in a way that leaving it doesn't. Better to wait for a natural reason, a birthday or a piece of news, and start fresh from there. This belief is the one that turns a slow reply into no reply, so it's worth looking at closely.

Peggy Liu, SoYon Rim, Lauren Min and Kate Min ran a series of preregistered experiments on what people expect when they get in touch with someone, a short message to see how they're doing, or a small gift to show they'd been thinking of them. Across the studies, people underestimated how much the person on the other end appreciated it. The gap was robust. And two things made it larger. The appreciation was underestimated more when the contact was a surprise, and more when the two people were less close. The researchers' account is that the person receiving the message is focused on the surprise of it, and the surprise feeds the appreciation, while the person sending it is focused on something else.

Turn that towards the stretch. A reply after three weeks is more of a surprise than a reply after a day. A friend you've half lost touch with is more distant than one you spoke to last week. By this finding, those are exactly the conditions under which you most underestimate how glad they'd be to hear from you. The belief says the length of the stretch makes contact worse. The research says it makes contact more welcome, and makes you less able to see that.

So where does the strangeness come from? It's the surcharge, and the surcharge is yours. You're the one who feels the reply now needs to open with an explanation, carry an apology, and be long enough to make up for three weeks. Your friend isn't waiting for any of that. If they're waiting for anything, it's to hear from you. The apology and the explanation are things you'd add to make yourself feel better about the stretch, and the friend would read past them to the part that matters, which is that you wrote.

I'd put it this way, and it's an interpretation. There's no length of stretch after which a message is unwelcome. There's only a length after which you've talked yourself out of sending one. The second is real. The first isn't. And the reply that finally closes a long stretch doesn't need to be a good one. It needs to exist.

"A short reply would look rude"

You've thought of just sending something. "Lovely cake. Yes to October, I'll check dates." And you've rejected it, because it's five days late and it's two lines, and two lines after five days looks like you didn't care enough to write more. Better nothing now and something proper later. This is the belief that keeps the meaning-to alive, and it rests on an idea of what a reply is for.

So ask what a reply does. It tells the friend you saw the message. It tells them you're still there. It answers whatever they asked. And it keeps the conversation open for the next thing. That's the whole job. Two lines does all four. Nothing does none of them. The proper reply, when it finally comes, does the same four things with more words and a bigger surcharge. There's nothing in the longer version that the friend was missing except the words, and the words weren't the point.

Lara Aknin and Gillian Sandstrom's studies, which the earlier book *Ring* them first describes in full, give a small picture of how contact actually happens. In their last study, what got more people to message an old friend wasn't persuasion. It was three minutes of sending ordinary messages to current friends first. Three minutes, for about three people. Those aren't proper replies. They're lines, the kind you'd send without thinking, and they were the thing that made the harder message possible. Friendships run on lines. The long message is the exception, and treating it as the standard is what stops the lines.

There's a reading of the short reply I want to head off. You imagine your friend seeing "lovely cake, yes to October" and thinking, is that it? I've never met the person who thinks that. What people think when a short reply comes is, good, they saw it, October's on. What people think when no reply comes is chapter 4. If you're weighing two lines against something rude, two lines wins easily. And you're not weighing it against something rude. You're weighing it against silence, which is the only thing in this list that can actually be read as rude, and the only thing you've been sending.

One more thing about the short reply. It's the one you can send from the queue. That's not a weakness. It's the whole point. A reply that fits in the queue gets sent in the queue, and a reply that needs a desk waits for the desk, and the desk is where the meaning-to lives.

"We'll pick up where we left off"

This belief is the kindest one in the book and the most costly. The friendship is old and solid. You've known each other since school, or the first job, or the flat. You could go a year and meet and it would be as though no time had passed. So the silence doesn't touch the friendship. It just pauses it, and a pause can be ended whenever you like.

Sam Roberts and Robin Dunbar studied this in a way that separates the two things it runs together. In one study of 251 women's social networks, they looked at how long it had been since each person last had contact with each friend or relative, and found that the time since last contact tracked emotional closeness closely. The longer since contact, the less close. That was true of friends and of family, but the pattern differed. The costs of keeping up a relationship with family, they conclude, are lower than the costs of keeping up a friendship. In a second study they followed people's whole active networks over eighteen months, across a major change in their lives. Family relationships and friendships behaved strikingly differently. Friendships declined in quality unless effort went into them, and the effort that prevented decline was, for the women in the study, talking together more often, and for the men, doing more together. Debra Oswald and Eddie Clark found the same shape in school best friends going to college. Distance didn't matter. How much they communicated did, and the friendships that lasted were the ones where people kept up the ordinary things, being positive, being supportive, telling each other stuff.

Put the two together and the belief comes apart. Family keeps. You can go a year without ringing your brother and the relationship, whatever its state, is roughly where you left it. Friendship doesn't keep. It's held up by contact and it settles when the contact stops, slowly, without a moment you could point to. The friend from school you haven't spoken to in a year isn't paused. They're a little further off than they were, and the meeting when it comes will be warm and slightly effortful, and you'll both say it's as though no time has passed, and then another year will pass.

A garden left for a season isn't ruined, and it isn't waiting either. It's gone a little back to what it was before anyone tended it. That's all the stretch does, and it does it every week.

I'm not telling you to be afraid of this. I'm telling you the pause isn't free, and the belief that it is has cost you friends you'd have kept for a line a month.

"Nobody meant anything by it"

This is true. You didn't mean anything by the five days. Your friend didn't mean anything by the fortnight before it. Nobody in the whole thinned list of the last ten years ever decided to let a friendship go. And because nobody meant it, the belief runs, nothing was really done. The silence isn't a slight, so it isn't anything.

The trouble is that intent isn't what a friendship runs on. Contact is. Chapter 8 was about that. A friendship can thin with nobody meaning it in exactly the way a plant can die with nobody meaning it. The absence of a decision doesn't put the water back. What "nobody meant anything by it" actually does is something different, and I think it's this. It answers the question "was I wronged", and it answers it correctly. No. And then it treats that as an answer to a different question, "was anything lost", and it isn't.

Look at how the ending of a friendship by delay actually goes, because it's never a single act. You leave a message a week. They leave the reply a fortnight, partly because a week's silence had cooled them a little. You leave theirs three weeks, because by now there's a surcharge on it. They don't send the next one at all, because the last exchange took two months and it felt like effort at both ends. A year later you think of them, and the stretch is now so long that chapter 6 takes over. Neither of you did anything. Each of you did nothing, in turn, and two unintended silences make an ending as surely as a decision would. The only difference is that a decision would have had a reason, and this doesn't.

I'd rather you saw this clearly than felt bad about it. Feeling bad is a poor tool here. It adds to the surcharge and makes the next reply heavier. What's useful is to notice that "nobody meant it" is exactly the condition under which the thinning happens, because if somebody meant it, they'd have said something, and the silence would have ended one way or the other. The friendships that go this way are the ones where everyone was well disposed and nobody wrote.

Which means the fix is the same size as the problem. Nobody needs to mean anything by a reply either. It doesn't have to be an act of friendship, or a repair, or a sign. It just has to be sent. The friendship that thinned by inches nobody intended can thicken by inches nobody intends, and two lines on a Tuesday is one of them.

"I haven't got time for friends right now"

There are seasons when this is nearly true. A new baby. A parent who's ill. A job that has taken the year. In those seasons the open messages pile up faster than usual and the meaning-to becomes a kind of holding pattern, and you tell yourself the friends will understand, and they mostly will. But look at what the belief claims, because it's larger than the season.

It claims that the delay is where the time goes. Jeffrey Hall followed people who'd recently moved somewhere new, and first-year students over nine weeks, and found that the hours spent together, and the time spent on leisure rather than chores, went with how close people became. Friendship takes hours. That part of the belief is right, and Dunbar's review of the friendship research puts it the same way, that making and keeping friends is costly in time. But the hours Hall is talking about are hours together. They're the drink, the walk, the weekend in October. They're not the reply. The reply is a minute, and the delay doesn't save the minute. It spends the minute several times over, every time you open the message, feel the small weight of it and close it again.

Here's what I think actually happens in the busy season. You haven't got hours for the drink, which is fair. So you don't reply to the message about the drink, because the reply would have to say no, or not yet, and that feels worse than saying nothing. And the message stays open, and the friend reads the silence as chapter 4 describes, and when the season ends and you do have hours, the

friend has stopped asking. The delay didn't protect the friendship through a busy time. It let the friendship go quiet during the one stretch when a line would have held it.

The line for a busy season is short and honest. "Can't this month, it's all gone to pot here, but ask me again in March." That's fifteen seconds and it keeps the friend on the list, and the friend will ask again in March, because you told them to. Nothing in that needs an hour. What needed an hour was the proper reply, and the proper reply was never coming in this season or any other.

So separate the two claims. You may not have time for friends right now, in the sense of hours. You always have time for the reply, because the reply doesn't take any. And the reply is the thing that decides whether the friends are still there when the hours come back.

"I'm just not a texter"

Some people say this and mean it. They'd rather ring. They hate the way a message strips a voice down to words on a screen, and they find themselves unable to write "how are you" without it sounding flat. So the messages sit, not because of a standard, but because the medium is wrong, and they'll speak to the friend properly when they see them.

Two things. The first is that this is true and it doesn't help, because the medium isn't the friendship. A message is the door, not the room. What goes through the door can be a call, a plan, a walk. But the door has to be answered, and the friends who message you are standing at it. The earlier book *Ring them first* describes a study by Amit Kumar and Nicholas Epley in which people got back in touch with an old friend by phone or by email, and the phone gave a stronger sense of connection and wasn't the awkward experience people had predicted. So if you're a caller, call. The mistake isn't preferring a voice. The mistake is letting the preference become a reason for the open message to stay open until the call that doesn't happen either.

The second thing is that a preference for talking can be honoured in a line. "Not going to do this by text, ringing you Thursday evening, be in." That's a reply. It's two lines. It answers the door and it names when the room opens. Or send a voice note, which is talking, and takes as long as it takes to say the thing, and doesn't need a standard because nobody has one for voice notes. Or reply with a photo and nothing else. The form doesn't matter. What matters is that something comes back today.

The NHS, in its five steps for mental wellbeing, puts good relationships first and says two things that fit here. Arrange a day out with friends you haven't seen for a while. And don't rely on messaging alone to build relationships, because it's easy to get into the habit of only ever texting. I'd read that as a case for using the message to set up the thing that isn't a message. Not as a case for leaving it.

And if the truth is nearer to the earlier book *The phone can wait*, that you're on your phone a good deal and none of it is replying to friends, then it's worth noticing that the messages you don't answer live on the same screen as the things you scroll. The minute is there. It's being spent on something else. Being "not a texter" is a fine thing to be. It's a poor reason for a friend to hear nothing.

What the friend sees

Turn the phone round. Your friend sent the cake on Tuesday. She'd spent the morning on it and was pleased with it, and she sent it to three people, and you were one of them because you'd have got the joke about the icing. She saw that you'd read it. She thought, they'll reply tonight. On Wednesday she thought, busy. On Thursday she didn't think about it. On Friday she saw your name in a group, posting about something else, and thought something she didn't quite put into words. By Sunday she'd filed it. Not as a wrong, but as a small fact about where she stands.

I want to be careful here, because the book so far has argued that the friend isn't hurt, and mostly they're not. But there's a difference between hurt and noticed. Andrew Hales and colleagues asked people to recall a time when a friend checked a phone during a serious conversation, and compared them with people recalling a conversation without that. The ones who'd been briefly ignored reported feeling excluded and a small pain, and the effect partly ran through a drop in how much they felt they mattered to the friend. That's a study about a phone in a conversation, and the earlier book *Look up* is about that habit. I'm extending it to the unanswered message, and the extension is mine. But the mechanism it describes is ordinary. Being ignored is felt, even briefly, even by people who tell themselves it's nothing, and what it touches is the sense of mattering.

An open message is a small, repeated, silent version of that. The friend doesn't feel it as a blow. They feel it as a slight lowering of the temperature, an adjustment to how much they'll send next

time, a question they'll ask a little less confidently. Over months the adjustments add up. The friend who used to send you cake photos sends them to two people. The one who asked about a drink three weeks ago stops asking, not from pique, but because they've learned what happens when they ask. They didn't decide any of this either. They adjusted, which is what people do.

What the friend never sees is the meaning-to. They don't see you opening the message on Wednesday and Thursday and Sunday and feeling warmly and putting it down. From their side, the warm feeling and the cold silence are indistinguishable, because only one of them arrives. That's the unfairness at the heart of this habit. The friend is being treated, from their end, like someone you've cooled on, by someone who hasn't cooled at all.

How the thinning happens

It's worth laying the whole mechanism out once, because the habit depends on each step looking like nothing.

A message arrives. You like the friend and you want to answer well, so you attach a standard to the reply. The standard makes the reply a task that needs conditions, and the conditions aren't here, so the message stays open. That's the first day. On the fourth day the stretch has grown enough that the reply now needs a surcharge, a "sorry, mad week" at the top, and the surcharge makes the reply slightly bigger and slightly less pleasant, so it stays open longer. By the second week the turn has appeared, and the silence has a reason. By the fourth week it's been too long, and the reply has become a catch-up, a big message that has to cover a month, and catch-ups need a desk and an hour and a good mood, so it waits for those. The friend, meanwhile, has done chapter 12, and sends the next message a little later and a little shorter. You answer that one faster, because the previous one is still open and this one lets you skip it, and for a while things seem fine. Then the next one doesn't come.

Nothing in that sequence is an event. Each step is a day on which a reply that could have been sent wasn't, for a reason that was true that day. The reason changes as the stretch grows, from the standard to the surcharge to the turn to the catch-up, and each reason is bigger than the last, so the reply gets harder as the reasons for sending it grow. That's the shape of it. The longer you leave a message the more welcome a reply would be, by chapter 6, and the less able you are to send one, by this chapter.

A tap left dripping doesn't flood anything, and after a year the bill has come and nobody remembers turning it on.

I'd add one more piece, which is about how the thinning stays invisible. You don't see it because there's no day on which you had the friend and a next day on which you didn't. What you see, years later, is a list of names you're fond of and don't speak to, and a story about how people drift apart, which is true and which leaves out the part where the drifting was made of days like today. The friends you've kept aren't the ones you liked most. They're the ones where, for whatever reason, the replies kept coming.

The whole mechanism turns on the first step, the standard. Take that off and the message closes on day one, before the surcharge, before the turn, before the catch-up, and none of the rest happens. The method in chapters 19 to 21 is mostly about that first step, because it's the only one that's cheap.

The invitation left on read

Some open messages are questions, and the question has a date in it. Do you fancy a drink Thursday. Are you around the weekend of the twelfth. We're doing a thing for Dan's fortieth, can you come. These are the messages that stay open longest, because they need an answer and you don't have one yet. You'd like to go. You're not sure you can. You'll know by the end of the week. So you leave it, and the maybe stays open on their phone in a way that's worse than a no.

Here's why. A no is information. The friend can plan around it, invite someone else, or ask you for a different date. A maybe with no words attached isn't a maybe to them. It's a silence, and they read it as chapter 4, which is to say they read it as a no delivered without the courtesy. And when you finally answer, on the day before, with a yes, the yes carries the surcharge of having left them hanging. When you answer with a no, you've spent a fortnight of their uncertainty to deliver the answer you could have given on day one.

The belief is that a maybe keeps your options open. It keeps your options open. It closes theirs. And it costs you something you don't see, which is that the friend learns to invite you later, or with less notice, or last, because you're the one who doesn't answer. Invitations go to the people who reply. That's not a punishment. It's how people plan.

The fix is to answer the question you can answer today, which is nearly always one of three. Yes. No. Or "I'd like to, don't know yet, I'll tell you by Friday", which is a real maybe, with a date on it, and it does the friend's planning for them. That third one is the one people don't send, because it feels like an admission that you can't organise your life. It isn't. It's the most useful message in this book, because it converts an open question into a closed one with a deadline, and by chapter 3 a deadline is exactly what a reply needs. Say Friday and Friday will come and you'll answer, because you said you would.

One more thing about the no. It's allowed. You don't have to want to go to Dan's fortieth. The earlier book You could have said no is about saying it, and this book only adds that a no sent today keeps a friend, and a maybe never sent loses one, and the two take the same fifteen seconds.

The birthday you missed by a day

The ninth was their birthday. You knew. You thought of it on the eighth and again at some point on the ninth, and the day went, and on the tenth you saw someone else's message in a group and realised. And now a message would have to say belated, which advertises that you forgot, and it's the eleventh, and by the fourteenth it's absurd, and so the birthday goes unmarked, which is worse than any of that.

This is the stretch at its purest, because the surcharge arrives in a single day. A birthday message on the day needs no explanation. A day late it needs "belated". Three days late it needs "belated" and "sorry" and a reason. And the belief that runs it is that late is worse than never, that a late message draws attention to the lapse while silence hides it.

Silence hides nothing. Your friend knows it was their birthday. They know who wrote and who didn't. A message on the twelfth that says "Belated happy birthday, I hope it was a good one, what did you do" tells them that you thought of them and that the thought reached the screen, which is the only thing a birthday message was ever for. The silence tells them the thought didn't, or that there was no thought, and they can't tell which, and most people assume the second.

Liu and colleagues' finding from chapter 6 applies here directly. A late message is a surprise, and surprise is where the appreciation comes from. The friend who gets three messages on the day and one on the twelfth remembers the one on the twelfth, not because

it was late, but because it came when nothing was expected, and because it meant you'd thought of them on a day that wasn't the day. I'm reading their result into a situation they didn't test, but it fits.

The belated line, then, is a good line and not an embarrassing one. It's two lines like any other, and the word "belated" is the whole surcharge. No sorry, no reason, no "I'm terrible with dates". Just belated, and the wish, and a question. The question matters because it turns a lapse into a conversation, and a conversation is what a birthday message was trying to start.

And if the birthday was in March and it's September, the belated line is still a good line. "I've just realised I missed your birthday by half a year, which is a record even for me, how are you." That's not a confession. It's the pick-up, which chapter 21 is about, with a reason attached that both of you can laugh at. Late by a day and late by a year are the same move, and the move is to send something.

The friend you haven't seen for a year

At the far end of the stretch there's a different kind of open message, which is a friend with no message at all. You haven't spoken in a year, or three. There's no question waiting, no cake, nothing to reply to. There's just a name and a warmth and a growing sense that contact would now need to be a catch-up, a big message or a long call covering everything that's happened, and you haven't got the afternoon for that, so the name stays a name.

This is the surcharge grown up. The catch-up is the proper reply with a year's interest on it, and it's just as fictional. Nicholas Epley and colleagues, reviewing the research on why people connect less than would be good for them, describe a pattern they call undersociality. People expect others to respond less warmly to their approaches than they do, and they name three reasons. The two people construe the approach differently, so the sender is thinking about how it'll look and the receiver about how it feels. The sender can't be sure how the other will respond, and treats the uncertainty as a warning. And the sender rarely finds out how it would have gone, because the approach they don't make gives them no information, so the expectation never gets corrected. Every one of those applies to the friend you haven't seen for a year, and the third is the trap. You never learn that the message would have been welcome, because you never send it, and so next year the stretch is longer and the expectation is the same.

Add chapter 6. Liu and colleagues found the underestimation of appreciation was largest for contact that was surprising and between people who'd grown distant. A friend you haven't spoken

to in three years is the most surprised and the most distant person you could write to, and by that finding the person whose gladness you'd most underestimate.

So the pick-up doesn't need the catch-up. It needs a line, and the line can name the stretch or not. "Saw a poster for that band and thought of you. How are things?" Nothing about the year. Nothing to explain. The catch-up, if it happens, happens in the room, at the drink you'll arrange in the third message, where a year of news takes an hour and is a pleasure rather than a task.

And when you meet, it'll go the way it always goes, which is warm and a little effortful for ten minutes and then fine. Chapter 8 said friendship doesn't keep. It also doesn't vanish. It settles, and one afternoon lifts it most of the way back, and the afternoon doesn't need a year's message to book it.

What the delay costs you

The book so far has been about the friend's end. This chapter is about yours, because the belief under all of this is that the delay costs you nothing. It costs the friend a little, maybe. It costs you an occasional heavy feeling on a Sunday. Otherwise it's free.

It isn't, and the cost has a shape. Dunbar's review of the research on friendship opens by calling it the single most important factor in health, wellbeing and happiness. That's a large claim from a review, and I'd hold it loosely, but the direction is well supported and I don't know anyone who'd argue the other way. What the delay does, slowly, is reduce the number of people who know what your week was like. That's the first cost, and it's the one you feel least, because it's an absence. The friend who used to know that your mum was ill and the job was wobbling has stopped knowing, not because you decided to stop telling them but because the telling happened in replies and the replies stopped.

The second cost is invitations. Chapter 14 said they go to the people who reply. Over years, the delay moves you from the first list to the second, and the second list is the one that gets the message a week before, when it's already a plan. You'll feel this as people not asking, and you'll read it as people drifting, and it'll be neither. It'll be people planning, with the information they've got, which is that you don't answer.

The third cost is the one that lands in middle age. Ruixue Zhaoyang and colleagues had 173 adults aged twenty to seventy-nine report on their social interactions five times a day for a week. Middle-

aged adults gave the lowest ratings of how positive their daily interactions were, lower than the young and lower than the old. That's one study and it's about all interactions, not friendships, and I'm not going to build much on it. But it matches something most people in their forties will recognise, which is that the days fill with interactions that aren't chosen, and the chosen ones, the friends, are the ones that have thinned. The delay is a large part of how they thinned.

And the fourth cost is the Sunday feeling, which you already know about, and which you've been paying every week. Eleven open messages is eleven small weights, each carried every time you open the phone, and none of them heavy enough to do anything about. Add them up over a year and the delay has cost you more attention than the replies would have, which is the strange arithmetic of this habit. You saved the minute and spent the week.

Ten years of inches

Look at the list from chapter 1 in a different way. Not the eleven open messages, but the names further back, the ones with no open message because the last one was two years ago. The friend from the first job. The couple you went on holiday with. The one from the antenatal group. You didn't fall out with any of them. You liked them all. And you'd struggle to say when they stopped being people you saw and became people you were fond of.

That's the thinned list, and everyone over thirty has one. What I want to say about it is that the friends on it can't be replaced, and the delay treats them as if they could. Hall's study of people who'd moved somewhere new found that closeness tracked hours together, and the hours weren't small. Making a friend takes time you mostly had in your twenties and don't have now. Roberts and Dunbar's work on phone records found that a large share of the people we're in contact with are transient by nature, in and out of our lives within a year or two, and that the ones who stay can be picked out early by how much contact there is. The friends on your thinned list weren't transient. They'd stayed. They'd got past the point where most contacts fall away, and then they went, by inches, for lack of a line.

A new friend at forty-five is possible and it's rarer and it takes hours. An old friend brought back takes one message and an afternoon, because the hours were already spent, years ago, and they're still there under the stretch. That's the arithmetic that

makes the pick-up in chapter 21 worth more than almost anything else in this book. You're not building. You're reopening something already built, and the cost of the reopening is a line.

Ten years of inches is also ten years of practice. The habit of leaving messages doesn't stay with the messages. It becomes the way you handle people who aren't in front of you, and it teaches the people around you what to expect, and what to expect is a slow reply or none. The reputation is small and it's real and it's fixable, because reputations follow behaviour, and two lines today for a month changes what people expect faster than you'd think.

I'm not asking you to work through the thinned list. Most of it can stay as it is, fond and quiet, and that's a fine thing for a list to be. I'm asking you to notice that it was made of days like today, so that today can go differently for the eleven who are still asking.

Two lines today

Here's the method, and it's small. The chapters before this were the reason it's small. A friend's message gets a reply today, and the reply is two lines, and two lines is not a minimum you're allowed to exceed. It's the standard. If you find yourself writing a fourth line, you've reattached the proper reply, and the proper reply is what was keeping the message open.

What two lines contains. One line that answers or acknowledges what they sent. One line that keeps it going, a question, a date, a bit of your own. "Lovely cake, she'll have been made up. Yes to October, I'll send dates Sunday." That's it. If there was a question in their message, the answer is the first line. If there wasn't, the first line is just the thing you'd have said if they'd shown you the cake in person, which is never more than a sentence.

Where it's sent from. Wherever you read it. The queue, the bus, the two minutes before a meeting. The rule is that the reply doesn't wait for a better place, because the better place is where the meaning-to lives. If you read a message and can't reply in the next minute, don't read it. Leave it unread until you've got the minute, which will be today, because the minute always comes.

The opening. Not sorry. Not "sorry for the slow reply", not "mad week", not "I've been meaning to". The earlier book You've apologised enough is about the reflex, and here it has a specific cost, which is that the apology is the surcharge, and the surcharge is what made the reply heavy. Start with the cake. If the stretch has

been long enough that not mentioning it would be odd, mention it in three words and move on. "Slow, sorry. Yes to October." The friend didn't want the sorry. They wanted October.

What it isn't. It isn't a call, a visit or a plan. Those are chapters 11 and 21, and they go through the door the reply opens. Two lines isn't the friendship. It's the thing that keeps the friendship reachable. Don't ask it to do more than that and don't hold it back until it can.

When it's an invitation. Chapter 14. Yes, no, or a maybe with a date. The maybe with a date is two lines. "Would love to. Don't know yet, I'll tell you Friday."

Do it now, with the eleven. Not the oldest, that's chapter 25. The other ten. Two lines each, today, from wherever you are. It'll take a quarter of an hour, and at the end of it the list is clear, and the small heavy feeling that's been on your Sundays will be gone, and you'll notice that nobody replied with "is that it".

The turn doesn't exist

The second part of the method deals with the stretch that has no open message in it. The friend who sent the last one, or the one where nobody can remember, or the one where you've told yourself it's their go. Chapter 5 said the turn was a fiction. This chapter says what to do instead of keeping it.

Reply or start, regardless. If there's an open message, it's yours. If there isn't, and the person's crossed your mind, that's yours too. There's no third state in which it's correctly theirs and you're correctly waiting. The count is abandoned, not settled.

The line without news. The message that starts a stretch closing doesn't need a reason. This is the part people find hardest, because a message with no news in it feels like it needs a purpose, and the purpose becomes the catch-up, and the catch-up needs an afternoon. It doesn't need a purpose. "Passed the place we used to go and thought of you. How's things?" The earlier book Say the good thing out loud is about the message that carries a good thought and nothing else, and it fits here exactly. The thought is the reason. It's enough.

Same rule, same size. Two lines, today, from the queue. The line without news is if anything shorter than the reply, because there's nothing to answer. Its whole job is to exist and to end with a question, so that the next thing is theirs and a conversation has started.

What to expect. Most will answer, some quickly, some with a line that begins "I was just thinking about you", which is the turn from their side and tells you they'd been keeping it too. A few won't, and chapter 23 is about them. None will think it strange, because by chapter 6 the strangeness was yours.

The earlier book Ring them first has a rule for the thought that crosses your mind, get in touch that day, and it's aimed at the reader for whom nobody's writing at all. If that's nearer your situation than this book's, go there. Here the point is narrower. The turn is the reason you've given for the stretches without a message in them, and it's the only reason in this book that was never doing anything for you. Give it up and the stretches are just stretches, and a stretch ends with a line.

The catch-up can wait

The third part is for the long stretches, the names from chapter 16 and the back of the list in chapter 18. A year, three years, a friendship that's gone from weekly to nothing without a fight. Here the catch-up is the whole obstacle, and the method is to refuse it.

Don't do the catch-up in a message. A year of news doesn't go in a message. It goes in a room, over an hour, where it's a pleasure. The message that reopens a long stretch says nothing about the year. It says one thing, or asks one thing, and it's two lines like the rest. "Just found the photo from the Lakes. Are you still in Bristol?" If you want to name the stretch, name it once, lightly, and don't apologise for it. "Been far too long. How are you?"

One thing, or a date. The pick-up message is either one thing you thought of, which is chapter 20's line, or a date. "I'm in Bristol on the fourteenth, any chance of a coffee?" A date is the stronger of the two, because it converts the pick-up into a plan in one move, and a plan doesn't need a catch-up before it, it is the catch-up. If you can offer a date, offer it. If you can't, one thing, and offer a date in the third message.

The third message. The pick-up goes, they reply, and the third message is yours, and its job is the room. A call, a coffee, a walk, a visit. Chapter 11 said the message is the door. For a long stretch the door has to open onto something quickly, because a long stretch handled entirely by message becomes a new stretch. Two exchanges, then a date.

Expect it to be easy. Chapters 6 and 16 said you'd underestimate how welcome this is. That's not encouragement, it's the finding. The person you haven't spoken to in three years is the one most likely to be glad, and the least likely to have been expecting anything, and the reply will come, and it'll be warmer than you'd have guessed, and you'll wonder why you waited. Then you'll be in a room with them, and ten minutes in it'll be fine, and an hour in you'll have covered the three years without trying, because that's what rooms are for.

One a week, not the list. Don't work through the thinned list. Pick one name a week, or one a fortnight. The list isn't a task. Most of it can stay fond and quiet. The pick-up is for the two or three names that still give you the small heavy feeling when you see them, because that feeling is telling you which ones aren't finished.

The decision

Here's the rule. A friend's message gets two lines today, and I don't owe a better one.

That's it. It isn't a rule about being a better friend, or about having more friends, or about calls and visits, which follow from it but aren't it. It's a rule about the reply. When a message arrives, the default used to be the meaning-to. Now the default is two lines from wherever you are, and the proper reply is retired, because it never existed.

Three when-then plans, which are a form the research on planning supports, a specific situation paired with a specific act, so the act doesn't need deciding in the moment.

When I read a friend's message, then I reply in two lines before I put the phone down, and if I can't, I leave it unread until I can.

When I catch myself typing "sorry for the slow reply" or "I've been meaning to", then I delete it and start with the thing they sent.

When I think "it's their turn" or "it's been too long", then I take that as the sign that it's mine, and I send the line without news.

What to expect, and this is my expectation and not a finding. The first week the replies feel thin and you'll want to add a third line. Don't. The second week the list is clear for the first time in years and stays clear, because a message that's answered on arrival never gets a stretch. Somewhere in the second month replying on arrival stops being a decision and becomes what happens, which is what

Phillippa Lally and colleagues found in a study of everyday habits, where a daily behaviour in a fixed setting became automatic over weeks and a missed day didn't undo it. You'll get more messages, because people send them to those who answer. You'll get invited earlier. Two or three friends from the thinned list will be back in your week, not through any big effort but because the door was answered and the third message named a date. And the Sunday feeling will be gone, which you'll notice one Sunday and not think much about, which is the point.

The rule doesn't ask you to be warmer than you are. You were always warm. It asks you to let the warmth arrive, in the size it fits in, on the day it happens, and to stop holding it back for a version that does the friend justice, because the friend never wanted justice. They wanted to hear from you.

The friend who never replies either, the friend abroad, the new baby, the bereavement, the group chat, and when messages are genuinely hard

Some situations change the method, and this chapter takes them in turn.

The friend who never replies either. You send the line and nothing comes, or a line comes a month later. The rule is the same. Two lines when theirs arrives, however late, and no surcharge on them either. What you don't do is keep a count, because that's the turn returning. If a friend goes quiet for good after two or three lines from you, chapter 9 applies from their side and it's not your business to fix. You've kept the door open. Some people don't come through it, and a fond, quiet name on the list is a fine outcome.

The friend abroad. Time zones make the reply-on-arrival rule awkward, because their evening is your night. Reply when you read it anyway, they'll see it in their morning, and messages don't mind waiting once they're sent. The pick-up for a friend abroad is the same, one thing or a date, and the date is a call, because the room is a screen. Twenty minutes on a Sunday every couple of months holds a friendship across the world better than a proper reply a year.

The new baby. Theirs or yours. If theirs, they're not reading the open message as anything, because they're not reading. Send lines anyway and expect nothing back for months. A line a fortnight that needs no answer is exactly what someone with a newborn wants

from a friend. If yours, chapter 10. You've no hours and you've a minute, and the minute keeps the friends for the year when the hours come back.

The bereavement you left too long. You didn't write when their dad died, because you didn't know what to say, and now it's been three months and writing would draw attention to the silence. Write. "I've been useless and I'm sorry. I've thought about you a lot. How are you doing?" This is the one place in the book where sorry belongs, once, and then the question. Three months late is welcome. Three years late is welcome. Never is the only thing that isn't.

The group chat. A group with forty unread messages isn't an open message and doesn't need a reply. Mute it if it's noise, and don't feel you owe it anything. What it can hide is the one message in it that was for you, a question with your name on it, and that one is a friend's message and gets two lines like any other. Reply to the person, not the group, if the group is too loud.

When messages are genuinely hard. For some people the open message isn't a standard. It's one of dozens of small things that don't get done, alongside the form and the appointment and the keys. The NHS lists being easily distracted or forgetful, finding it hard to organise your time and finding it hard to finish tasks among the signs of ADHD in adults, and says that if the symptoms are affecting your work or relationships, to see a GP about what support is available. If that's you, the rule still helps, because reply-on-arrival removes the remembering, but a rule isn't support, and it's worth asking for the support. And if any contact makes you

anxious, so that the open message is frightening rather than heavy, the earlier book *Go anyway* is about that and starts further back than this one.

If none of these is you but you've stopped answering everyone and it comes with feeling low most days for weeks, the preface said to see a GP, and I'll say it again here.

Eleven open messages again

It'll happen. A bad month, a holiday, a stretch of work that ate the evenings, and one Sunday you open the phone and there are eleven open messages and the oldest is from three weeks ago and the small heavy feeling is back. The thought that follows is that the rule didn't take. That you're the kind of person who leaves messages and a month of not leaving them was a phase.

Look at what the month showed. For four weeks the replies went on arrival and the list stayed clear and the friend from Bristol is back in your week. That happened. It isn't undone by three weeks in which it didn't, any more than a month of walking to work is undone by a week of buses. Lally and colleagues, in the study chapter 22 mentioned, found that a missed day didn't materially affect the habit forming. I'm extending a missed day to a missed month, and that's my extension, but I think the shape holds. What the return to eleven open messages tells you is that the old default is still there underneath and comes back when the conditions that made it come back, tiredness and a full list. It doesn't tell you the new one failed.

The mistake to avoid now is the catch-up. Eleven open messages after three weeks look as though they need a session, an evening set aside to work through them properly with a surcharge on each. That's the proper reply arriving in bulk, and it'll keep the eleven open for another fortnight while you wait for the evening. Don't set aside anything. Two lines each, from the queue, today, no sorry at the top. A quarter of an hour. The list is clear again by tonight and the return took a day.

Then ask which belief let it back in, because it'll have been one of the chapters. Usually it's chapter 10, the busy season, and the message that needed to say "not this month" and said nothing instead. Sometimes it's chapter 3, a message that arrived with a question big enough that a standard got attached. Find the one and you'll know what to watch for. Don't look for a character flaw. There isn't one, and looking for it adds a surcharge to every reply for a week.

And don't count. Not the open messages, not the days since the lapse, not the times it's happened. The turn was a count and it did nothing. The rule is the same size after a lapse as before it. Two lines, today, and no better one owed.

The message from Tuesday, answered

It's Sunday evening again, a month on. The phone is out because someone's sent something and you've picked it up to answer it, which you did, in two lines, in the time it took the kettle to boil. The list is clear. It's been clear for most of the month, apart from a Tuesday when a message arrived during something and you left it unread, on purpose, and answered it at four.

The oldest one from chapter 1 is still there, because I asked you to leave it. Open it now. It's the cake, and October, and it's been five weeks, and every reason in this book for not answering it has been at some point true. It's been too long. She'll have thought you'd gone off her. A reply now needs to explain the five weeks, and the explanation would be long and a bit shaming, and a Sunday evening isn't the moment.

Two lines. "That cake. Your mum's face. Yes to October, are the weekends of the tenth or seventeenth any good?" Send it. Don't read it back. Don't add the third line about the five weeks. Put the phone on the side.

It'll buzz before the kettle's cooled. It'll say something like "Ha, I thought you'd fallen off the earth, the seventeenth is perfect", and you'll notice that "fallen off the earth" is the whole five weeks, delivered as a joke, by someone who was glad to hear from you and had been keeping the turn herself. Then you'll notice something else, which is that the reply you've just sent is roughly what you

were going to send on the first Tuesday, before the standard got attached, and that everything in between was the surcharge, paid by you, for nothing.

Friendships aren't kept by the messages you mean to send. They're kept by the ones you send, in the size they fit, on the day they come. The thinned list at the back of your phone was made of days like this one. So was the friend who's just replied. One of those is fixed now, and it took the time a kettle takes, and the next one will take less.

Answer the oldest one. Then put the phone down and go and find something to watch, and this time there's nothing heavy on the side, and October's in the diary.

Notes

These notes give the sources behind the claims in each chapter, and say where I'm giving my own interpretation. The book isn't medical advice. If low mood, anxiety or difficulty with everyday tasks is affecting your relationships, your GP is the person to ask. The examples throughout, the cake for the seventieth, the eleven open messages, the friend in Bristol, the friend with the newborn, Dan's fortieth, are invented to illustrate and aren't drawn from real people.

Studies were checked on 26 September 2026 by reading their published abstracts. None was read in full, and none carried a retraction notice at that date. One carries a correction, noted under chapter 12. Several of the studies are about strangers, job candidates or students rather than established friendships, and I've said each time where I'm extending a result beyond what it tested.

Chapter 1. No sources. The terms are the book's own.

Chapter 3. Steel, "The nature of procrastination: a meta-analytic and theoretical review of quintessential self-regulatory failure", *Psychological Bulletin* 133, 2007, pages 65 to 94. A meta-analysis of 691 correlations. Task aversiveness and task delay are the reviewer's terms. The claim that the proper reply is a standard and not a task is mine. The earlier book referred to is *It can be done today*.

Chapter 4. Kalman and Rafaeli, "Online pauses and silence: chronemic expectancy violations in written computer-mediated communication", *Communication Research* 38, 2011, pages 54 to 69. Managers evaluated job candidates whose email response times were one day, two weeks or over a month of silence. The extension from hiring to friendship is mine, and the description of how a friend reads nine days is my observation, not a finding.

Chapter 5. No research sources. The earlier book referred to is Ring them first. The account of the turn is mine.

Chapter 6. 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. A series of preregistered experiments. The abstract gives no sample sizes and none are printed. The claim that the surcharge is the sender's is mine.

Chapter 7. Aknin and Sandstrom, "People are surprisingly hesitant to reach out to old friends", *Communications Psychology* 2, 2024, article 34, as read in full for Ring them first, where the notes give the figures. The account of what a reply does is mine.

Chapter 8. Roberts and Dunbar, "Communication in social networks: effects of kinship, network size, and emotional closeness", *Personal Relationships* 18, 2011, pages 439 to 452. 251 women. Roberts and Dunbar, "Managing relationship decay: network, gender, and contextual effects", *Human Nature* 26, 2015, pages 426 to 450. Whole active networks over 18 months. The abstract gives no sample size. Oswald and Clark, "Best friends

forever?: high school best friendships and the transition to college", *Personal Relationships* 10, 2003, pages 187 to 196. The garden is mine.

Chapter 9. No research sources. The sequence of two silences is my description.

Chapter 10. Hall, "How many hours does it take to make a friend?", *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 36, 2019, pages 1278 to 1296, as verified for Ring them first. The widely quoted hour thresholds aren't in the abstract and aren't printed. Dunbar, "The anatomy of friendship", *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 22, 2018, pages 32 to 51, a review. The claim that the delay saves no hours is mine.

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, as verified for Ring them first. The NHS page on five steps to mental wellbeing, at [nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk), read on 26 September 2026. The earlier book referred to is *The phone can wait*. The door and the room are mine.

Chapter 12. Hales, Dvir, Wesselmann, Kruger and Finkenauer, "Cell phone-induced ostracism threatens fundamental needs", *Journal of Social Psychology* 158, 2018, pages 460 to 473. Two studies using recalled conversations. A correction was published in the same journal in 2020, volume 160, pages 264 to 266, which I haven't read. The extension from a phone in a conversation to an unanswered message is mine. The earlier book referred to is *Look up*.

Chapter 13. No research sources. The whole mechanism is my description, drawing on the chapters it refers to. The tap is mine.

Chapter 14. No research sources. The earlier book referred to is You could have said no. The claim about how invitations get allocated is my observation.

Chapter 15. Liu and colleagues, as above, applied to a situation they didn't test, which the chapter says.

Chapter 16. Epley, Kardas, Zhao, Atir and Schroeder, "Undersociality: miscalibrated social cognition can inhibit social connection", Trends in Cognitive Sciences 26, 2022, pages 406 to 418. A review. Differential construal, uncertain responsiveness and asymmetric learning are the authors' terms, put into plain words in the chapter. Liu and colleagues, as above.

Chapter 17. Dunbar 2018, as above, for the opening claim, which is a reviewer's summary rather than a finding and is treated as such. Zhaoyang, Sliwinski, Martire and Smyth, "Age differences in adults' daily social interactions: an ecological momentary assessment study", Psychology and Aging 33, 2018, pages 607 to 618. 173 adults aged 20 to 79, five reports a day for a week. The four costs are my observations.

Chapter 18. Hall 2019, as above. Vergara Hidd, López, Centellegher, Roberts, Lepri and Dunbar, "The stability of transient relationships", Scientific Reports 13, 2023, article 6120. Mobile phone data from the United States, the United Kingdom and Italy.

Used for the single claim that many contacts are transient and the lasting ones can be picked out early. The claim that an old friend can't be replaced quickly is my extension.

Chapter 19. No research sources. The earlier book referred to is You've apologised enough.

Chapter 20. No research sources. The earlier books referred to are Say the good thing out loud and Ring them first.

Chapter 22. 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, for the when-then form. Lally, van Jaarsveld, Potts and Wardle, "How are habits formed: modelling habit formation in the real world", European Journal of Social Psychology 40, 2010, pages 998 to 1009. 96 volunteers, 82 with usable data. The rule hasn't been tested as a package and what I say to expect is my expectation.

Chapter 23. The NHS pages on ADHD in adults and on the symptoms of depression in adults, at nhs.uk, read on 26 September 2026. The earlier book referred to is Go anyway. No claim is made about the effectiveness of any service.

Chapter 24. Lally and colleagues, as above. The extension from a missed day to a missed month is mine.

Looked up and not used. Oswald, Clark and Kelly's 2004 paper on friendship maintenance behaviours in the Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology had no abstract available to me and isn't cited. Kalman and colleagues' 2006 analysis of response times in online communication likewise. Ledbetter, Griffin and Sparks' 2007 study,

which followed pairs of best friends over nineteen years and found that similarity and months of closeness at the start predicted closeness at the end, is about what makes a friendship last rather than about delay, and isn't cited. Kumar and Epley's 2018 study of gratitude letters is used in Thank them now and Say the good thing out loud and isn't needed here. Lieberman and Schroeder's 2020 review of online and offline interaction was read and left out.