

# **personal social networks: assessing how we're doing**

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If you'd like to clarify & potentially look after your personal social network better, a good place to start is to chart it – see the linked '*Personal community map*'. Filling in the whole *community map* can take a good hour or two, so possibly, at this stage, just put your support clique into the most central circle. The first blog post in this sequence looked at the support clique – see "*Personal social networks (1st post): Dunbar's 2-15-50-150 model*". Support clique members can be identified in a number of ways. They're those you feel emotionally closest too. You're likely to be in contact with them at least weekly. They probably include people who you would first turn to in times of extreme stress or catastrophe. And also they are the people who you especially value spending time with. Different people in the support clique probably serve overlapping, but somewhat different functions. One might well put one's children in the support clique but, especially if they are young, one probably isn't going to lean on them strongly when stressed. You might even want to put pets into the support clique if they're very important for your wellbeing.

There may be one or two support clique members who you position especially close to the central marker (which represents you) - see "*The structure of online social networks mirrors those in the offline world*". It's helpful to add a few descriptive labels by each name - are they "K" (genetically-related kin), "CK" (kin by couple or marriage relationship to oneself or to other kin), or "F" (non-related friend)? Roughly how many years have you known each of them? Are they "L" (local) or "NL" (non-local), where local refers to someone who lives close by - say approximately within an hour or so's travel (it's an indicator of face-to-face accessibility). It may be useful too to put in a simple approximate measure of current emotional closeness beside each name, with E10 representing an immensely close relationship down to E0 representing no sense of particular emotional connection. These emotional closeness scores decrease as one moves from the inner support clique to the outer layers of one's personal social network.

Now what can you learn from this developing personal community map? See the linked "*Personal community map: questions*" sheet. The first question on the sheet is most relevant to one's inner support clique, although one's sympathy group (see the last post) partially serves this close emotional function as well. How do you score these particularly emotionally close relationships in your life using the "0" (there are no satisfactory really emotionally close relationships in my life) to "100" (the number, level of closeness, availability, and how I make time for these relationships is just about perfect for me)? This first question is probably the most important in this whole social network assessment - see, for example "*A four year analysis of social capital and health status of Canadians: the difference that love makes*".

The second question on touch is important too. This year's fascinating research paper "*More than just sex: affection mediates the association between sexual activity and well-being*" highlights that sex increases subsequent affection & positive emotion, which in turn increases wellbeing & relationship/life satisfaction. But touch is about much more than just sex – see "*The communicative functions of touch in humans*". As the paper "*Non-verbal channel use in the communication of emotion*" highlights, touch is a key non-verbal way of communicating love, care & sympathy. When touch is used sensitively & appropriately, it is a wonderful thing. It can boost a deep sense of security – "*Touch promotes state attachment security*", doing this in non-intrusive ways – "*Touch is a covert but effective mode of soliciting and providing social support*", encouraging effective cooperation – "*Tactile communication, cooperation, and performance*", while promoting psychological health – "*The neurobiology shaping affective touch*", and physical health too – "*Does hugging provide stress-buffering social support: a study of susceptibility to upper respiratory infection and illness*".

It's a bit like gardening. Please don't despair if you score yourself low on this support clique question. You can definitely do something about improving your situation. Even if you score yourself pretty highly, it's worth asking yourself – how can I cherish these relationships even more? Can I be more creative and regular with the time I spend with these people to nourish the relationships even better? Often 1:1 time is especially beneficial, talking at depth, and valuing having this closeness in our lives. **[Cont.]**

And usually, if we want to grow the strength & value of our support clique, it's useful to look out to our sympathy group. For more on this, see the previous blog post in this sequence – "*Personal social networks (2nd post): the sympathy group & the full active network*". Precisely how you fill in your personal community map is much less important than how much it helps you understand and respond to the state of your personal social network. I'm a member of a number of groups - badminton players, a book group, a therapists' supervision group, and so on. Extending the meaning of 'group', I also have contacts who I know from university and medical school. When I fill in my personal community map, I put the names of people I know into approximate segments – like slices of a cake. So there's the medical segment, the badminton players segment, and so on. Of course, especially closer in with the support clique and sympathy groups, some people could potentially be put into several of these interest/activity segments – so this is a rough and ready, though potentially helpful, way of going about things.

You can work on filling in the map over a number of sittings. It can be very interesting to do. I tend to put in *K/CK/F*, *Years Know*, *L/NL* & *Emotional Closeness* labels for all support clique and sympathy group members. And I extend this labelling out to the affinity group third layer too. Good to answer the 3rd, 4th & 5th sections of the personal community map questions sheet now. It may well be that these are the areas where it's initially easiest to make a difference to your community map scores. After all, as the saying goes "*It takes a long time to make an old friend*" – but you have to start somewhere, and getting to know a new friend can sometimes be as much fun as spending time with an old one. So, if it looks like it would be helpful, consider how you could increase your shared activities and interests. Consider if there are interest groups you could try joining. Physical exercise/sport, entertainment, hobbies/crafts, subjects you'd like to learn more about, volunteering opportunities – there are so many options available. Organisations like *meetup.com* and, here in my home town, *volunteeredinburgh.org.uk* are examples of the many information resources that are just a click away.

It can feel a bit of a business-like, but the concept of having a social time budget is accurate & can be very helpful. We only have so many hours a week that we can realistically 'spend' on nourishing & enjoying relationships. How do we allocate this budget? Are we making regular enough & high enough quality time for those who are already close to us? Are there people you can highlight on your community map who you would like to bring in closer? How could you do this? Are there people who are getting too much of your time budget? Should you see them a bit less frequently or in less time-demanding situations? Jot your thoughts & feelings down on the personal community question sheet. It will probably take planning, time & effort, but this is likely to be well worthwhile. Think of the many strong benefits of having a good social network for your psychological resilience, your physical health, and for your overall wellbeing.

The blog posts "*Personal social networks (4th post): birds of a feather flock together*" and "*Personal social networks (6th post): how can we look after our relationships better?*" give helpful suggestions. I find various metaphors helpful – for example '*mountains*', '*food*', '*gardens*' & '*music-making*'. So a healthy social network with its approximate (1-2) 5-15-50-150 structure looks a bit like a *mountain*. And we want a *mountain-shaped* personal social network, not a flat-topped mound, nor a flagpole! And relationships are a bit like '*food*'. Different kinds of relationships, different layers of our network, serve somewhat different functions. We need this varied diet to be healthy & resilient. And we want to avoid too much that's toxic in our diet too ... just as we want to resolve or make more distance from toxic aspects of our social networks - see, for example, the post "*Personal social networks (5th post): the frequency of conflict*".

Do jot down ideas that emerge from these ways of looking at things onto your personal community questions sheet. And another relationship metaphor is that our network is like a '*garden*'. If we don't look after it regularly, watering the different plants, they will wither. And we may look at sections of the garden and realise they need more colour. And this might involve encouraging growth in plants/relationships that are already there, or it might involve bringing in new plants/new people into our network. And the last of these four metaphors – '*music making*' – highlights that we simply will find it much easier to '*make music*' & relate easily & tunefully with some people than others. And "... *birds of a feather*" blog post gives hints here, although some friendships happily will reach right across dissimilarities & boundaries and delight us with differences as well as shared characteristics.

(note, links to all articles mentioned are on the 8.03.17 [www.goodmedicine.org.uk](http://www.goodmedicine.org.uk) blog post)

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