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Singletons have a higher number of inner-circle connections when young. That dwindles, experts think, as friends develop their own romantic relationships and families.

Falling in love costs you friends

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No wonder you expect so much from your romantic partner — they're doing the work of two people in your life.

A new U.K. study contends that people in committed relationships tend to have two fewer friends and/or family members in their inner circle of relationships.

For most of us, this key support group contains four to six people, those we turn to on a regular basis and the people we would most count on in a crisis.

After surveying 540 people, Oxford University anthropologists Max Burton and Robin Dunbar found that the number varies significantly depending on your romantic status.

Those in a relationship tended to average out around four, including their partner. Single people averaged five — an extra family member, plus an extra friend (minus a partner).

"Studies have shown that how many close friends you can have is constrained by various factors — including your time to invest in these relationships," says Burton. "Single people simply have more time.

"So both groups are at their limit.

It's just that for people in relationships, that limit is lower."

That number can also be affected by age — but only if you're single.

Those in relationships tended to have a steady number of inner-circle connections. Singletons had a much higher number when young. That number diminished steadily over time.

"(That's) perhaps because they suffer as their friends develop their own romantic relationships and families," Burton contends.

Burton suggests that this finding creates a paradox: that falling in love may have a high social cost as you "shed" close friends.

"You can imagine that people enter a slight degree of social isolation when they enter romantic relationships. You're putting all your eggs into one basket," says Burton. "That's why a couple might struggle later on — because you don't have that normal back-up support."

Also, he suggests it's reasonable to expect that many of us feel we need to get two persons' worth of support from our partner, since that's what we've lost to bring them into our lives.

The study casts friendship as an economic proposition. The more you put in, the more you get out.

Hence the small number in the inner circle.

Previous work by Dunbar has identified a maximum on friendships — 150 is all most people can reasonably maintain. That figure has come to be known in anthropological circles as "Dunbar's Number."

Dunbar has also noted that friends occupy three concentric circles in our lives.

- At the core are those four to six people we see at least once a week. Burton notes that there is no perfect number for this circle.

"The optimal number depends on what you want out of those relationships," Burton says. "I believe that people are quite good at optimizing that number."

So, some may concentrate their friendship resources on two very close friends. Others may choose to hold 10 people tightly, though they must more carefully portion out their attention.

- One level outside the core includes acquaintances who we might see at least once a month.

- At the outer level are those who we see infrequently but for whom we'd feel a sense of loss were they to die — the so-called "sympathy group."