

They are rich who have true friends - mates are key to happiness, new research shows

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(PhysOrg.com) -- When friends meet, hearts warm, according to the old proverb — and new research from The University of Nottingham backs this up.

An extensive study into how our social networks affect our emotional well-being has found that the more friends we have, the happier we are — and those of us lucky enough to have more than ten good friends are more likely to be happy than unhappy. The 'Circle of Friends' study, commissioned by The National Lottery, looked at levels of happiness and satisfaction with life among lottery winners and non-lottery winners.

1,760 respondents participated in a UK-wide questionnaire examining how satisfied they were with life, exploring their achievements and their relationships with their friends — including when they met, how often they talk, the kind of activities they do together and how many new friends they have made in the past two years.

The report found that those with five friends or fewer had a 60 per cent chance of being unhappy. People with between five and ten friends have a 50 per cent chance of being happy. But for people with more than ten friends, the likelihood of being happy varies between 55 and 56 per cent. Adding more friends than this doesn't significantly increase the possibility of happiness — so ten is the optimum number. On average, respondents who reported themselves 'extremely satisfied' with their lives had twice the number of friends of those who were 'extremely dissatisfied'.

And — to coin another proverb — the old ones are the best when it comes to your mates, particularly if you are a lottery winner. The lottery winners who responded to the survey were happiest when they had friends they had known for a significant proportion of their lives. But for all respondents, quality counts for more than quantity. In Manchester, respondents reported a below-average number of friends — but were closer to them than those in other cities — with 31 per cent reporting that they were 'satisfied' with life, 20 per cent that they were 'extremely satisfied'.

And the UK's happiest city, Birmingham, backed this up — 75 per cent of respondents were happy, 11 per cent higher than the sample average. This is despite people in the city having an average of 29 friends, four fewer than average. They were 3.4 per cent closer to their friends than average. In Liverpool, where just 57 per cent were happy, respondents had three more friends than average, but were 4.9 per cent less close than the sample average.

The study was carried out by Dr Richard Tunney, Associate Professor in the University's School of Psychology. “Having a number of old, close friendships is closely related to happiness,” said Dr Tunney. “But people can only keep and strengthen their friendships by actively maintaining them. It follows that a clear pre-requisite for happiness is to look after our friends.

“It's quality, not quantity, that counts. Having long-term friendships for more than ten per cent of one's life — for a 40-year-old this would be four years — makes happiness more likely. The closeness of relationships is clearly important to well-being. Having close and old friends makes us happier.”

Provided by University of Nottingham

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