

The Pandemic Has Erased Entire Categories of Friendship

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American culture does not have many words to describe different levels or types of friendship, but for our purposes, sociology does provide a useful concept: weak ties. The term was [coined in 1973](#) by the Stanford sociologist Mark Granovetter, and it comprises acquaintances, people you see infrequently, and near strangers with whom you share some familiarity. They're the people on the periphery of your life—the guy who's always at the gym at the same time as you, the barista who starts making your usual order while you're still at the back of the line, the co-worker from another department with whom you make small talk on the elevator. They're also people you might have never directly met, but you share something important in common—you go to the same concerts, or live in the same neighborhood and frequent the same local businesses. You might not consider all of your weak ties friends, at least in the common use of the word, but they're often people with whom you're friendly. Most people are familiar with the idea of an inner circle; Granovetter posited that we also have an outer circle, vital to our social health in its own ways.

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