

What If Friendship, Not Marriage, Was at the Center of Life?

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In the past few decades, Americans have broadened their image of what constitutes a legitimate romantic relationship: Courthouses now issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples, Americans are [getting married later](#) in life than ever before, and more and more young adults are [opting to share a home rather than a marriage license with a partner](#). Despite these transformations, what hasn't shifted much is the expectation that a monogamous romantic relationship is the planet around which all other relationships should orbit.

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A few decades after the erosion of romantic friendship began, Americans' conception of marriage shifted. The Northwestern University psychologist Eli Finkel identifies three distinct eras in American marriages. The first, running from the colonial period until about 1850, had a pragmatic focus on fulfilling spouses' economic and survival needs; the second, lasting until about 1965, emphasized love. Finkel makes the case that starting around 1965, the "self-expressive marriage" became the ideal; spouses expected their partnership to be the site of self-discovery and personal growth. (Excluded from these structures for most of the nation's existence were the tremendous number of Americans who were denied access to legal marriage, namely enslaved Black Americans, interracial couples, and same-sex couples.) Throughout this evolution, Americans started relying more and more on their spouses for social and emotional support, with friendships consigned to a secondary role.

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