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*EARTH*

*(A guide for those of us  
who find it hard)*

GRAHAM PANTHER

# **HOW TO BELONG ON EARTH**

**(a guide for those of us who find it  
hard)**

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Graham Panther

[www.bigfeels.club](http://www.bigfeels.club)

# INTRODUCTION: BELONGING IS HARD WORK SOMETIMES

I have a new message on my phone. A group chat I'm part of (in theory).

I have not yet opened this new message.

I've hovered my thumb over it a few times. I've read the message preview. I've even strongly considered the possibility of, at some undisclosed future moment, pressing on the message and reading it.

But here is my dilemma. It's a message on Facebook messenger. So even though I do want to read it, if I open it, then...

*They'll all know I've read it.*

And right now this feels like an insurmountable barrier.

So I do what I've done multiple times already this morning. I close the messenger app, and I put my phone back down.

In my phone, this group chat is called 'Games Night', a legacy of how the thread started, as a method of organising our weekly get-togethers.

Before the pandemic that's all it was really used for, but through six Melbourne lockdowns, the thread flourished into a thriving virtual hangout. A place for sharing dumb jokes, musings, and nervously tracking the endless bad-news-cycle. It's a group of some of my favourite people, friends I've known for years, helping each other through the weirdness of life in the 2020s in small, nourishing ways.

And I haven't said a single thing in this thread for months. Lately I'm struggling to even open it at all.

## **So what's that about?**

For as long as I can remember, I've found it hard to feel like I belong in groups.

Social events have always been a source of angst. When I have something on my calendar - even something small - I'll often spend days thinking about it beforehand. Expending all kinds of energy picturing the thing - how it'll be, whether I'll enjoy myself - before eventually going along and having a perfectly nice time.

I like socialising. I just, never seem to remember that I do.

## **The rhythm of socialising**

A few years ago, in my early 30s, I finally stumbled on a workaround for this particular problem: regular, recurring social activities.

Pick-up basketball on Sundays. A weekly Games Night on Wednesdays. 'Family Dinner' on Saturday afternoons (which is neither dinner nor is it with family, but the name has stuck).

For me, this more structured approach to socialising has two key benefits. First, it means I don't have to think about whether or not to say 'yes' to something. It's already established: I'm invited, and I'm probably going, so I bypass all the usual doubts. ('Do I really feel up to that this week?' 'Is this a real invite, or a polite invite?')

Second, it means I don't have to spend all that energy wondering who'll be there and what it will be like. These regular, recurring events are familiar, reliable. A known quantity.

I called it 'the rhythm of socialising'.

This rhythm helped carry me through some really big life stuff in the past few years. Divorce. A chronic health condition. Mental health crises. (My 30s:

nothing if not eventful?) At those times when, for whatever reason, my doubting thoughts would get the volume turned up and I'd become convinced no one wanted me anywhere, I could often still manage to get to one of these regular get-togethers. My weekly reminder that I was still a viable human.

But then the COVID pandemic hit (and hit, and hit, and hit). And that rhythm fell apart.

It started with the change in circumstances. Our in-person meetings weren't regular anymore. We'd squeeze them in when we could. That standing invite, that known quantity, disappeared. And with it, so did my resolve to turn up.

The old doubts crept back in. ('It's been a while, do they really want to see me?')

Then came the Zoom catch ups that were, ironically, so much easier to wiggle out of. ('I'm not feeling up to that today. No one will miss me.')

When I'm in this headspace (I call it my 'shame cave') the smallest friction will stop me reaching out. Staring at an unread message thread on my phone, I know that if I open it my friends will be able to see I've read their messages and still haven't responded. I also know that this isn't an actual problem, not really. But it's enough that I stop opening the messages.

Eventually, the Melbourne lockdowns came to an end. My friends started hanging out in person again, but I was no longer part of it. I'd lost that social rhythm.

As more and more time went by, the whole thing started to feel like more of a mountain to climb back up.

And bit by bit, I'd locked myself out of the group altogether.

## **A familiar cycle**

COVID was the big catalyst for my latest round of unbelonging, but looking back, I can see how this same cycle has actually happened before, many times. Things will be going along well enough, my weekly line-up of familiar events carrying me along. Then I'll miss one week, then maybe a second week, and suddenly feel I couldn't possibly be welcome ever again.

It's at times like these that the nagging whisper - *do I really belong here?* - gets louder in my head. When the ever-present question of belonging grows well beyond this or that social group, to something exponentially larger.

*Am I really a viable human? Do I even belong on earth?*

These swirling echoes of self-doubt can ring for days, weeks, or months, until I eventually, slowly but surely, drag my way back to connection, back to belonging, one small, tender step at a time.

The older I get, the more I wonder if there's something about *the act of belonging itself* that I find stressful, even on the smallest scale. In those times when I'm really stuck in my shame cave, the simple task of opening and responding to a group message is an exercise filled with risk and self-doubt.

(“Will I say something stupid? Am I even really part of this group?”)

It's no wonder I often avoid it.

## **What to expect from this book**

I've been wrestling with this 'belonging' stuff for as long as I can remember. Since my girlfriend and I started the [Big Feels Club](#) – our online community for 'big feelers' – we've had thousands of messages from people telling us how they wrestle with it too. If you're reading this book, chances are you know the feeling.

All of which poses a pretty big question. A question you've probably asked yourself before. In a way, it's kind of 'the' question when it comes to navigating life with big feelings...

*'Why is it so hard to feel like we belong?'*

That's the question this book tries to answer, specifically for those of us who find it harder than our friends seem to. The book is based mostly on my own attempts at belonging and what I've learned along the way, as well as what I've heard from other Big Feels Clubbers. It also tries to answer the implied question that follows: 'how might we make belonging a little easier for ourselves?'

And these aren't small questions! I've spent many years researching these questions from the inside - partly in an ongoing effort to solve the puzzle of friendship and connection in my own life. And partly because I think these sorts of questions actually have more to teach us than just how to get out the door on Saturday night. The more I've explored the question of 'how to belong', the more I think it holds some major clues about how to find *meaning* in a sensitive life - if we're willing to risk it...

The book has three parts:

**Part 1 asks, what does belonging even look like for sensitive types, anyway?** In which I argue that what we call 'belonging on earth' really has multiple layers, and we need more than one of these layers to feel like we really belong.

**Part 2 looks at solving the friendship riddle**, in which we ask why it is that you can have good friends and still feel crushingly alone, plus a few small, practical steps you can take to change that.

**Part 3 takes a deeper dive into the importance of finding your peers** - people who aren't just friends, but who actually know what it's like to live in a

brain like yours because they live in one too, and how vital this is to truly feeling you belong on this planet (big feelings and all).



# **PART 1: WHAT DOES BELONGING LOOK LIKE FOR SENSITIVE CATS?**

# BARRIERS TO BELONGING

What does belonging look like for sensitive cats? Well, much of the time, it looks like bloody hard work.

There are many layers we could look at in answering the question, ‘why is it so hard to feel like I belong?’ But I’m going to wager that for most of us, a fair chunk of it boils down to one deeply-held belief. One unassuming little phrase that lives in the dark corners of your mind.

*‘I’m not like the others.’*

The belief that you are fundamentally different to other people. Different from your friends. Different from your family. Different from those nice normal people who don’t seem to think every supermarket shopping trip is an ordeal.

And if you’re reading this book, chances are this feeling of difference isn’t totally unfounded, right?

We have a saying at the Big Feels Club (our community for sensitive cats). ‘When you’re sad or scared a bunch of the time, it’s hard to feel like you belong on earth.’ If you’re having a hard time, everyday life tasks can be harder than they seem to be for most people. So there *is* a difference there. And if your particular hard time has been going on for a few years now, that difference can start to seem even more stark.

But I think this feeling of ‘I’m not like the others’ often goes deeper than that. It’s not just as simple as ‘life is harder for me’. It’s something more... fundamental? As one Big Feels Clubber put it to me recently, ‘I have all the things you’re supposed to have, socially speaking. Good friends, family, a partner, but I still feel really lonely. And that loneliness feels like just one more sign of how different I am.’

So I think for some of us, it goes beyond just an awareness that ‘life’s harder for me’. Over time, it grows and transforms into something more like, ‘the

normal rules of human bonding don't apply to me.' It's the feeling that, even if you can somehow manage to sustain good relationships with other people, you'll still end up feeling crushingly alone. Because those good things - belonging, love, connection - they're not really *for you* now are they?

*(Which, ouch.)*

So let's dig down a bit here.

To set the scene, I want to name **three common barriers to belonging**, specifically for those of us with big feelings (aka the 'emotionally deluxe' among us). Three things that can get in the way of feeling like you're really part of your friend groups or work teams or whatever it may be. These three barriers to belonging are all riffing on this theme of 'I'm not like the others', and they're all based on my own first-hand research in the dark arts of belonging.

## **Barrier to Belonging #1. Big feelings present logistical challenges.**

When it comes to trying to fit in, being 'the sensitive type' can raise some practical issues.

That big party your friends can't wait to happen is, for you, a source of weeks of stress dreams. (Or, in my case, for 'big party' read: 'that small intimate gathering my girlfriend wants to have at our house'. *Good lord.*)

Barrier #1 can basically be summarised in the following diagram.

When it comes to comfort zones, I imagine that most people's experience looks something like this:



**Outside comfort zone**  
*"Bit nervous hey"*

But I often feel that, for me, it's more like this:



**Outside comfort zone**  
***FLAMING  
HELLSCAPE OF  
FEELS***

*(Just me?)*

And yet, in my experience, belonging often happens outside my comfort zone. I go to the party anyway, despite all those stress dreams. I agree to have people over to my house, and - on good nights - I end up feeling good about these decisions. But it sure can be hard work getting there, especially if much of your everyday life already makes you nervous.

## **Barrier to Belonging #2. We're often good at pretending we belong. But that can leave you feeling like a fake.**

This follows directly from Barrier #1. Our big feelings present logistical challenges when it comes to the usual social bonding activities, and we in turn learn to push through those challenges. To a casual observer, we might even look perfectly comfortable and confident as we do it.

In other words, we learn to pretend.

Sometimes all that pretending pays off. You push yourself to go to the social gathering, and you come away feeling warm and connected.

Then other times it just feels like you're going through the motions, putting on 'life drag', and worse, no one has even noticed.

So when you're having a particularly tough time, being good at hiding your big feelings is a double-edged sword. The better you are at pretending, the easier it is to maintain those vital social connections - work, friends, family commitments. But you can start to feel like a victim of your own success. Your ability to pretend can become just one more piece of evidence that you don't really belong here.

## **Barrier to Belonging #3. We forget belonging easily.**

Have you ever had a really great interaction with a friend - a great phone call or hangout - and then the minute it was done, started to wonder if they still like you?

It might be a specific thing that happened. 'Should I have said that thing? Was it horribly offensive?' In my case though, it's more often a general cloud of doubt that simply hovers over each of my friendships.

It doesn't seem to matter how well things are going in the friendship, how fun or mutually nourishing our last interaction was. It's as if my default assumption is that people are angry or disappointed with me.

Buddhists sometimes talk about how, in each of us, there's a wise voice hidden under all the self-recrimination and self-doubt. Sort of like a more enlightened version of yourself, waiting to be listened to. They call this voice The One Who Knows.

But when I'm stuck in feelings of guilt and self-doubt, I feel like I'm instead listening to that wise voice's shadowy twin. The One Who Knows (What You Did). The perpetually guilty conscience. To this second voice, it doesn't seem to matter that I'm mostly a good enough friend, or partner, or brother, or son. That guilty voice knows the awful truth, and won't let me forget it.

## **Return to factory settings**

A good interaction with a friend might soothe this guilty conscience, but there's a built-in return to factory settings that occurs, like clockwork, once enough time has lapsed. Give me a week or two after a great hangout, and I'll be convinced once more that you secretly hate me.

I *know* it's not rational. I can even talk myself out of it. But that guilty, not-good-enough *feeling* is still there, in my bones.

When I'm really in my shame cave, it's not just that I forget these moments of belonging, it's that the whole system turns in on itself. These are the times when even a nice, nourishing interaction will just make that guilty voice even louder. Like I've gotten away with something, and it's only a matter of time before I'm found out.

In a way, this is all an extension of Barrier #2 - 'We're good at pretending we belong'. After a positive interaction with a friend, we're left wondering, even if

they did enjoy our company, did they enjoy the real us, or did they just enjoy the pretence? And... can I really keep this up?

## **The 'good friend' paradox**

There's an interesting paradox here. In some ways, part of the reason I'm a good friend is that I have a guilty conscience telling me I'm a bad friend. That feeling of guilt can make me more likely to check in with friends or family who are struggling, for instance, and to make a point of really listening to them - something I know I'm good at (even if I'm not always the best at some of that other 'good friend' stuff, like turning up to social events or answering my phone).

This is essentially the evolutionary purpose of that guilty voice, after all. We are social creatures, so it makes sense that we have a finely honed internal tracker to make sure we're not screwing up our social bonds. The problem is when that internal alert system becomes so sensitive that it starts to hurt your friendships.

When it's at its loudest, this perpetual guilt can lead to a kind of guilty spiral, where the more doubts you have about your friendships, the more you pull back from those friendships. I call this the Cycle of Unbelonging. It can be a very lonely place to be. (More on this cycle, and how to get out of it, later in this book.)

...

So, those are three Barriers to Belonging, for those of us endowed with big feelings. I could list more, but this kind of gives us the scope of the challenge, right?

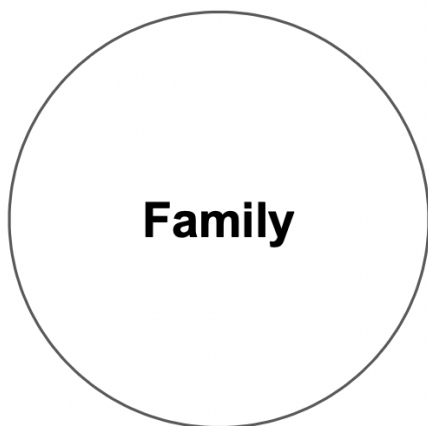
For me, all this begs two important questions. 1) What might belonging even look like, when you're the sensitive type? And 2) how can we nonetheless find the connection and belonging we're hungry for, even if it also scares us silly?

# WHAT MIGHT BELONGING LOOK LIKE FOR US?

We'll get to the 'so what do we do about all this' part of this book in Parts 2 and 3. But first, let's explore this question of what belonging might look like for big feelers, specifically.

Here is one way of describing it. I call it my 'Model of Belonging for Sensitive Cats.' (But really it's just a Venn diagram. Because who can resist a Venn diagram?)

It's an imperfect model, but a number of people have told me they've found it helpful, so here goes. Imagine there are three basic layers to belonging. The first layer is **Family**.

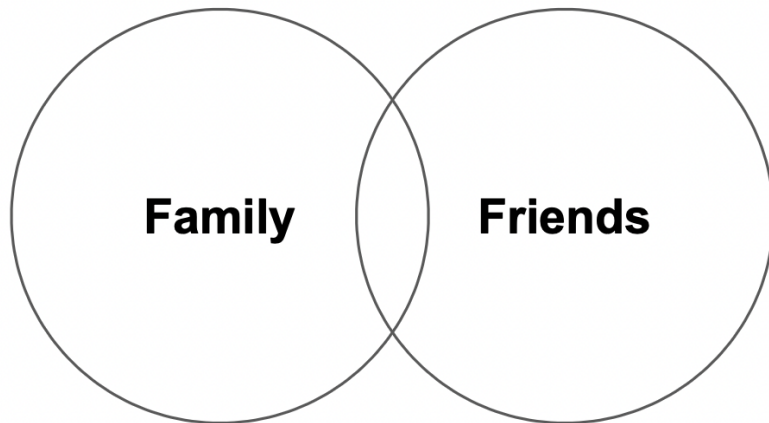


We're not actually going to dive into the topic of family in this book. That is a whole book of its own my friends (consisting of several large, heavily-bound volumes).

Suffice to say, family is the place you first learn to belong. And it's also the place you first learn to *not* belong. For most of us, that dance with our family continues - one way or another - for the rest of our lives.



The rest of this book is going to focus on the second and third layers of my model of belonging. The second layer is **Friends**.



The Friends circle includes, you guessed it, your friends. This includes close friends, those rare souls you've collected along the way and somehow convinced to hang out with you on a regular basis, despite having no blood ties or other kompromat forcing them to stick around. Perhaps it remains a mystery to you why some of these people are still in your life, but you've wisely decided not to look a gift horse in the mouth.

*Good move.*

Your Friends circle might also include people from your family, the ones you get along with (hence the overlap between the Family circle and the Friends circle in the spiffy diagram. See? This is very sophisticated stuff.)

But the Friends circle is also wider than all that. It includes work colleagues, the ones you see regularly (who don't drive you insane). And it includes friends who you see only in very specific circumstances - like my basketball buddies, who I've seen every week or two for years, but whose lives I know only in the barest of outlines.

(‘Oh Matt? Yeah I see him all the time. He has a partner named... something. And a kid, maybe? And a job. He definitely has a job.’)

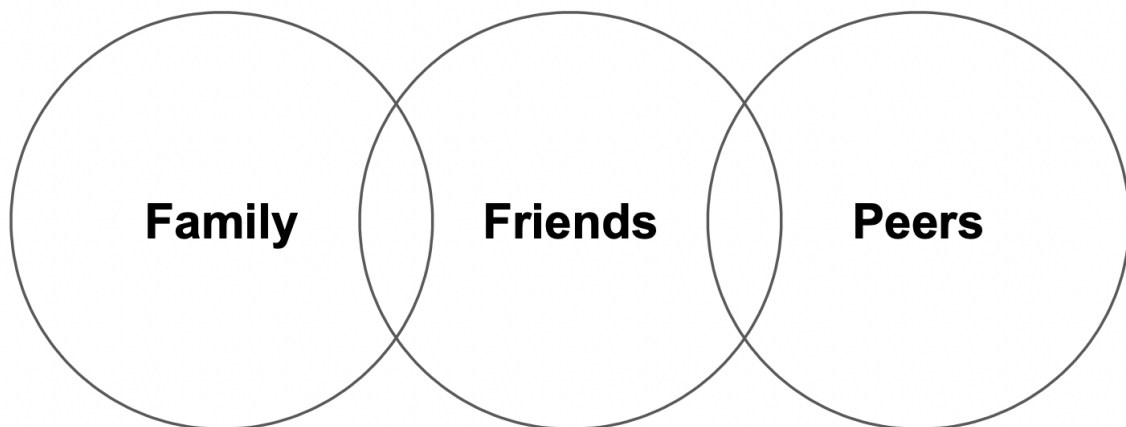
Your Friends circle includes more tenuous connections, too. Like the neighbour you wave hello to and have barely spoken three words with in three years, or the barista at your regular cafe, who knows your name and your order, but nothing more.

**This is the ‘I am part of society’ circle.** When you feel good about your Friends circle, you feel like you belong to society.

*Yusss. Not a total outcast. Yet.*

But when you’re not feeling good about this circle - when your friendships are going all wrong, or work is a nightmare, or you’ve somehow locked yourself out of the group message thread for reasons you only dimly even understand - it’s hard to really feel like you’re part of the world around you. This can be very lonely. More on that soon.

The third and final layer of this belonging layer-cake is what we might call your tribe of fellow weirdos. But which I will more respectfully refer to as your **Peers**.



When I say your peers, I mean ‘other people like you’. Fellow big feelers. Sensitive cats. The kinds of people who’d download an e-book about belonging.

*Or write one. AHEM.*

Because whether you've found them yet or not, they're out there. We can't *all* be the worst person in the world, right? Statistically, it's just not possible.

For some lucky people, their friends *are* their peers, so it's all just one big circle. In truth, I used to feel that way myself, until I hit age 18. When my brain started doing things that most of my friends couldn't relate to, suddenly my friends weren't my peers anymore, at least not in the way they once were. This happened again at age 23, when I had a total nervous breakdown. And again at age 33 when life got wobbly once more, and.... Well, you get the picture.

Your Peers are those rare (raaare) people you've found who truly 'get' what life is like for you, because they've lived it too. They're not just friends, they're something more than that.

**If your Friends circle helps you feel like you're part of society, it's your Peers circle that will help you feel like you're still a viable human, even when life is hard.** When you don't have anyone you'd consider a true 'peer' in your life, it's really hard to feel like you're not just a big weirdo, even if you have a bunch of good friends.

Later in this book, we'll talk more about how you can expand your Peers circle, but for now I'll just say this: this third circle doesn't have to have many people in it. In fact, the word 'circle' is probably a massive overstatement. It might be one person. One person who you can be just that little bit more honest with. When it comes to the Peers circle, one person is so much more than zero.<sup>1</sup>

So that's my Model of Belonging for Sensitive Cats (trademark pending). And here's my Big Theory. *We actually need both these types of belonging.* We need to find our peers, other big feelers, so that we can feel like viable humans. But we also need those friends and other networks that keep us feeling

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<sup>1</sup> If you read that last paragraph and thought, 'Great. I don't even have *one* person I'd consider a true peer, where does that leave *me*?' I'll say simply, keep reading this book. That's a *very* common experience on the 'life + big feelings' path. We'll talk about what you can do about it in Part 3.

connected to the ‘normal’ world, so that we can feel like we’re part of society at large.

When things are going well with our Friends circle, the underlying belief this gives us is something like: ‘I’m different, but I can still fit in.’ Meanwhile, when things are going well with our Peers circle, the belief is something like: ‘Maybe I’m not actually as different as I thought?’

And together, these two beliefs *add up to belonging*.

(That’s the theory anyway.)

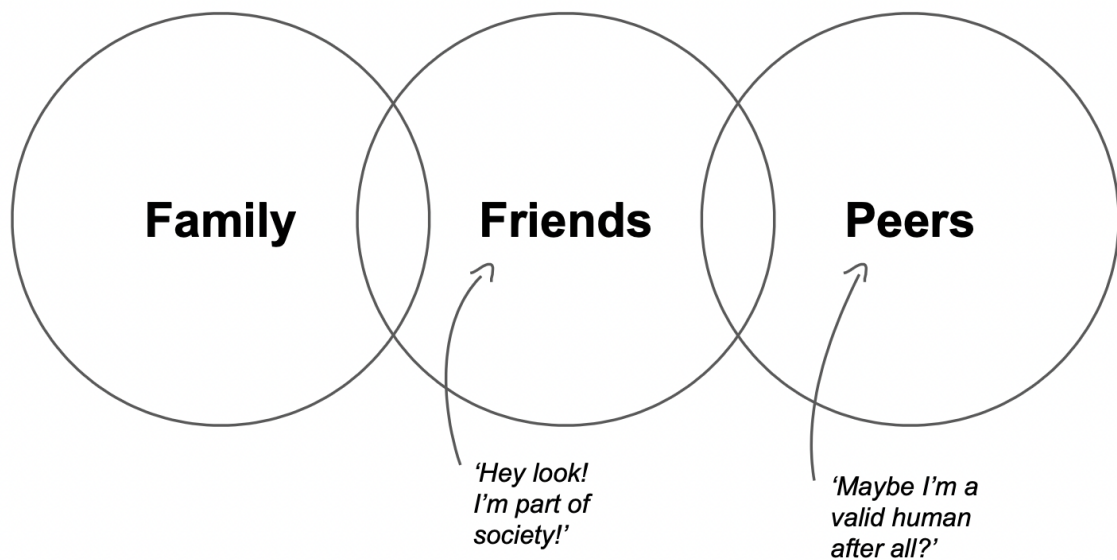
***‘I’m different, but I can still fit in’ + ‘Maybe I’m not as different as I thought?’ = ‘I belong’***

If you have just one of these two bases covered, you can still feel really lonely, like that Big Feels Clubber who wrote to me saying they have the boyfriend, the friends, the job, and they still feel disconnected.

But it can also go the other way. If you have been lucky enough to find one or two peers and share notes on life with big feelings, you can still feel pretty damn cut off from the world if things aren’t going well with friends or work colleagues. (Or if, say, you still can’t bring yourself to go to the local cafe near your house, because it’s been a few weeks since you went in and you’re afraid they’ll have taken that personally.)

*What an oddly specific example, Graham.*

Here’s the Venn diagram again:

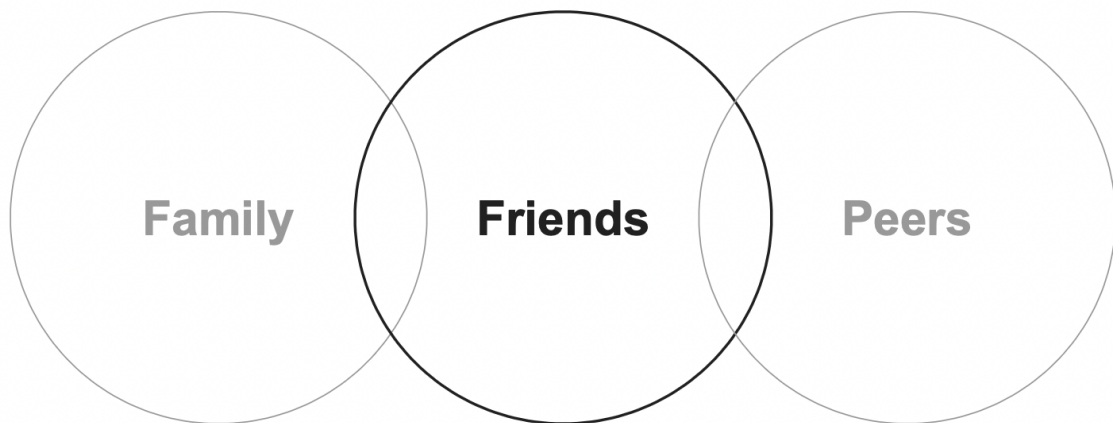


We'll come back to each of these types of belonging in greater detail - Friends, and Peers - but that's the Big Theory. That we need both types of belonging to really *feel* we belong.

**So. What can you do if either one of these areas isn't going too well just now?**

We'll look at each circle in turn. First, Friends. Then, Peers.

## **PART 2: SOLVING THE FRIENDSHIP RIDDLE**



# THE POWER OF TINY RISKS

In this part of the book, we'll look specifically at what it means to feel like you 'belong' with your friends. What gets in the way, and what small things can help when you're feeling cut off from it all.

This is not a how-to guide, because I wouldn't say I'm an expert at feeling I belong in my friend groups.

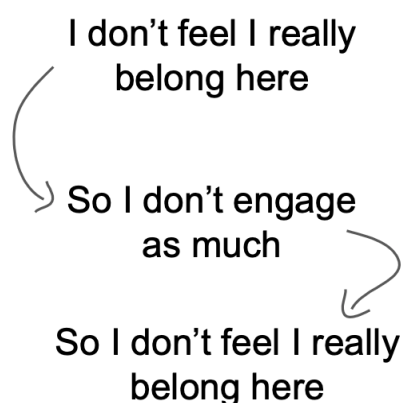
*WHAT??*

It's more of a 'here's what I've tried' guide. Notes from the inside. So take what's useful and leave the rest.

## The Cycle of Unbelonging

I opened this book with the image of me staring at a group message thread, seemingly unable to even open it. This image really speaks to the cycle we can find ourselves trapped in, when it comes to this stuff.

I call it the Cycle of Unbelonging:



Through this simple mechanism, things can escalate rapidly. A missed week or two at Games Night can become a deeply held conviction that I was never

really welcome in the first place, which in turn becomes a reason to hide myself away from that group for weeks or even months.

It happens with other groups too. I'll have a bad day on the basketball court, then miss a game or two, and start to wonder if anyone really wants me back. Or I'll go for a while without texting the boys' thread I'm part of, then I'll catch myself thinking crazy stuff like: 'well that's it, I'm not allowed to reply to this thread ever again now. Those are the rules.'

There's one particular feeling that fuels the Cycle of Unbelonging: shame. Shame at not being a better friend. Shame at just how 'in my head' I can get about something as simple as a group message thread.

If there's one feeling that makes you want to hide away even more than you did in the first place, it's shame. When we're ashamed, it feels like our shame is written on our very bodies for all to see. To show our faces, then, is to show our feelings, to reveal how crazy we really are. And this is unacceptable, because in those moments, we feel that *we* are unacceptable, for feeling all this in the first place.

This is how we supercharge the Cycle of Unbelonging. The more we feel we don't belong, the more ashamed we feel about feeling that way, the more convinced we are that we can never show our face in the group again.

## **Our tricky brains**

Our brains are tricky. We think, 'well if I feel this ashamed, there must be something actually wrong.' This can lead to all sorts of questionable conclusions, like:

'Everyone in this group is wondering how they can kick me out without it being awkward. Yep, that's what's going on here. Otherwise, why would I be feeling this ashamed?'



In other words, your brain does not always offer the most rational analysis, when it comes to questions of belonging. So these days I find it useful to unpick this a little more, when it's happening. To notice when the Cycle of Unbelonging is kicking into gear.

'Oh wait on, I haven't said anything in this group thread for weeks. \*That's\* why I feel like I can't say anything. That first message after a big gap always feels impossible to send... right up until I send it.'

You're offering your brain a different, equally plausible, explanation for how your body is feeling. Do I feel this ashamed because I'm a horrible person and my friends have all collectively figured this out at once, probably in some separate text thread labeled 'We Need to Talk About Graham'?

Or do I feel this way because I'm simply stuck in the Cycle of Unbelonging?

## **Belonging means taking risks**

Once you've realised you're stuck in the Cycle of Unbelonging, what do you do then?

You do the only thing you can do. You take the tiniest risk you can imagine taking, back in the direction of belonging.

For me, right now, it starts with opening that Games Night message thread. The one I've been ignoring for the last two months (or trying to ignore, while feeling increasingly shit about the whole thing).

So, as I type this, I am finally opening that message thread.

*The things I do for art...*

I tap the thread on my phone, take a deep breath, and eventually look at the screen, through squinting eyes.

My friends are debating which bird should win the Bird of the Year award. (Legitimately, an annual competition we hold in Australia. I am not making

this up.) It's a perfectly harmless discussion. No one is asking where the hell I've been or detailing what a terrible friend I am.

*Phew.*

The next tiny risk? Joining in the conversation.

*Good god.*

I think of a joke to add in the mix. A joke about birds.

My heart is actually racing as I type. Is it a good joke? I don't think it is! But I send it anyway! And then I sit back and wait for... well nothing really. Because belonging doesn't happen all at once.

The feeling of being locked out of this group was something that built up over time, in small steps of avoidance. Avoiding our gatherings and video catch ups. Then avoiding responding to the group thread. Then avoiding the group thread altogether.

Step by tiny step.

Reversing that process requires much the same approach.

## **Belonging happens in increments**

This is in fact a lesson I have learned a hundred times already, long before this latest self-imposed lockout with my Games Night friends. Belonging happens in increments. And it happens outside your comfort zone. In those tiny, tiny risks, that eventually add up to feeling part of the world again.

No one has replied to my message yet, but you know what? I already feel better for having sent it. Lighter.

Maybe I'll even go to the next actual Games Night.

*Whoa. Slow down there, soldier.*

And here's the thing. Even as I write this, I know this whole dance will happen again. At some point in the future, I'll get slowly convinced I don't really belong, whether it's with this group or another one. My doubts will get the better of me, and I'll start excluding myself from things.

But what I am slowly learning is that I also know how to come back from that. How to take those tiny risks back to belonging.

And that part? That's the part I'm getting better at. Yes, for whatever reason, I seem to find it harder than my friends do to feel like I belong. This whole business of having friends feels inherently risky to me, shadowed with self-doubt.

But I'm building my belonging muscles, one tiny risk at a time.

### **Key point: judging yourself makes all this harder**

There's a key step in all this, one that's easy to miss. Finding a way to not beat ourselves up for how hard all this can be.

The more I can muster a little acceptance for the fact that - for now at least - belonging doesn't come easy to me, the more I can work with my particular sensitivities, and keep doing the little things that help.

I mentioned what I call 'the rhythm of socialising' - my life-changing discovery that weekly, recurring social events were the best way to keep me on track with my friendships. One of the reasons this works so well for me (when I can keep it up, at least) is that it takes one of those Barriers to Belonging we discussed earlier, and turns it to my advantage: 'Barrier #3 - We forget belonging easily.'

I find that even when I'm doing pretty well, it only takes a week or two for the glow of 'we're friends!' to cool into the icy stab of 'but do they actually hate me though?' So for me, a weekly or fortnightly hangout with certain key friends is a perfectly timed thing. Just as I'm starting to wonder if you secretly hate me,

oh look, we're hanging out again. At no point did I have to take the scary step of proposing a hangout out of nowhere.

For a long time, I thought of this as a kind of prescription for myself. 'I *should* go to Games Night *at least* every two weeks, or I'll start to feel like I don't belong again.'

But the truth is, even before COVID came along and smashed any and all regular plans, there were multiple times I'd fall off the social wagon, so to speak. Times when I'd be especially tired one week, and shirk all my usual plans. Sometimes I could get away with this, but sometimes, for whatever reason, I'd miss the next catch up too. Then the one after that. And the Cycle of Unbelonging would wheeze back into life.

I used to think of this as a kind of failing. 'I *know what works, I just can't bring myself to do it!*' I'd judge my apparent inability to follow my own social prescription. But the thing is, this judgement wouldn't help. It would just add to the shame, fueling the Cycle of Unbelonging even more.

## **From prescription to description**

These days, instead of seeing my weekly, recurring social calendar as a prescription, I'm choosing to see it as more of a barometer. A simple way of gauging what's going on for me.

*When* I'm going to certain social things regularly, I find it's easier to go. And *when* I haven't been in a while (or when I haven't said anything in the message thread etc.) I find it's harder to go. So these days when I can't seem to stick to the schedule, I try not to beat myself up for it. Instead, it's a simple reminder: 'oh it makes sense that I'm finding it harder to engage right now. I've lost my usual rhythm.' This might be a prompt to find one tiny risk to take - opening a text thread, sending off a message. Or it might simply be a gentler way of naming what's happening: 'right now I'm burrowing in for a bit. It might be hard when I want to come back out again, but that's all part of the process.'

And the truth is, sometimes that process is far from perfect...

# PROGRESS MIGHT LOOK LIKE FAILURE, AT FIRST

It's Wednesday night. That Games Night hangout I said I might finally go to? It's happening tonight.

*Eek.*

In the hazy warm glow of having finally re-joined the Games Night message thread, I even wrote it on my to-do list: 'go to this week's Games Night hangout'.

Except that was about three weeks ago. And I still haven't gone.

*Oops.*

For pandemic reasons, our weekly catch up is back on Zoom as I write this. And yet that seemingly lower bar hasn't made it any easier to actually turn up.

When the first Wednesday rolled around, I happened to have a reasonable excuse not to go. So of course I didn't.

Then soon enough it was Wednesday again. (*How is it always Wednesday again??*)

All day that innocent to-do list item ('go to the Games Night Zoom Hangout') was staring at me from my notebook like one of those paintings with the eyes that follow you across the room.

By night time, I was watching the clock like a hawk. The Zoom hangout was due to start at 7pm. By 6pm, I was reasonably sure I was going to go. I ate dinner nervously, thinking about what I'd say if anyone asked where I'd been for so long.

By 7pm, the Zoom call was starting, and I wasn't in it. 7.30, the same. By 8pm, I'd actually managed to set up my laptop, click into the waiting room and stare at the little preview image of myself.

I certainly looked like someone about to join a Zoom call, I thought.

But I couldn't shake the feeling I'd arrive in the call just as everyone was logging off (after a great, nourishing conversation I'd had no part in). I imagined one or two friends sticking around out of pity, just so I didn't feel bad.

*Oh the shame.*

So I closed my laptop. I did not join the call.

### **Joining in, Take 3**

When my third opportunity rolled around a week later, things were feeling pretty dire. That to-do list item ('go to the Games Night Zoom') now felt like a kind of scarlet letter. Brandishing me a terrible friend and human.

'What, you can't even open your laptop and log on?'

But this week I had an ace up my sleeve. This time I'd explicitly committed, in the group thread, to coming to that night's Zoom call. A simple, unassuming 'thumbs up' emoji. It was the first time I'd even acknowledged the existence of a weekly hangout in several months. (Plausible deniability: forfeited.) Surely, there was no turning back now?

And in the end, somehow that was enough. I logged on. I saw the faces of friends I've known for years. People I genuinely love. People I'd somehow built up in my mind as some kind of monolith, but who are in fact just people.

My friends did comment on my extended absence, but in that way friends can, where it's not actually a criticism. Just gentle, affectionate ribbing.

("A Graham cameo! How delightful!")

And in the end, it was a really nice thing to have done. Emboldened by that one group hangout I then said yes to two other hangouts that week - one with my girlfriend's friends, and one family catch up, both of which I'd usually have seven reasons to say 'no' to.

## **Staying attached to the intent**

Let's be honest, it's not always easy to keep in touch with people. We can have all the best intentions, but find it really hard to follow through.

A friend of mine has a nice frame for this. He says, the key is to 'stay attached to the intent'. The intent to touch base with that friend he hasn't spoken to in a while, or that colleague that he's been meaning to catch up with. So that even if it takes him a while to actually do it, he knows he will get to it eventually.

I think as big feelers, there are essentially two ways we can stay attached to the intent. One helpful, one not so helpful. You probably already know the not so helpful way:

'Oh god I still haven't messaged so and so. It's been on my list for weeks. I'm such a shit friend.'

You're aware of the intent to reach out to this or that friend, but you're aware of it primarily through the prism of judgement and shame.

Perhaps there's a way of staying attached to the intent that is less judgemental. That honours all the procrastination and the doubt and the false starts as part of the process. That says 'this is hard, but we'll get there eventually.'

## **Trusting your imperfect process**

I look at my process with the Wednesday Night Zoom Hangout. It was hardly straightforward. For the first two weeks, it looked like failure, not progress. But it got me there, in the end.



When you're someone who finds belonging hard at the best of times, you have to nurture that intent to reach out, when it comes. Nurture it like the delicate little seed it is. And be patient with it (and yourself) while it grows. Yes, it might sit there on your to-do list for a while yet, bringing up all kinds of doubt and guilt and judgement. Yes you might wonder why this shit is so complicated for you, when it doesn't seem to be for other people. But maybe this is all part of the process?

I think patience is key here. You can water the seed, but you can't force it to sprout. The good news is, we don't have to be perfect to belong. We don't have to show up every time. Just some of the time. Enough to keep the friendship alive.

## **Sometimes we need to take bigger risks**

A last thought on the 'Friend' layer of belonging. There is one very specific situation when more effort is required.

If you're reading this thinking, 'great, but I don't feel like I even have any friends to reconnect with anymore,' there are a few things to say.

Sometimes those Barriers to Belonging we talked about earlier can do more than just make it hard to feel you fit in. They can leave you drifting apart from people altogether. Also, people drift apart all the time, for all sorts of other reasons! Moving cities, break-ups, changing jobs. All of which is to say, feeling you've lost many of your friends is not an uncommon place to be, hard as it is.

I moved to Melbourne about three months before my 30th birthday. As my birthday approached, I remember feeling more lonely than I had in years. Sure, I still had friends back home in New Zealand, but half of them were now scattered around the world themselves (as my fellow Kiwis tend to be at that age). I didn't want to have a party at all, but my partner thought it would be a good chance to meet new people in our new city.

To this day, it remains somehow the biggest birthday party I've ever had, but I knew about three people there.

*Nice.*

My friend Tim, who'd been living in Melbourne already for years, had corralled a bunch of his friends to come be my rent-a-crowd, and my partner had chipped in with a few friends of her own. Everyone had a nice enough time, but I could just as easily have not been there and it wouldn't have made much difference.

Eventually, a few of those guests did end up being my actual friends, but it was a slow process, with plenty of not-so-tiny risks involved. Like the multiple times I asked guys out on exceedingly awkward friend dates. Or the moment I decided to start playing basketball, at age 32, despite being about a foot shorter than most of the other guys on the team, only to find out that I love playing it.

## **Walking blindly forwards**

I look back on it all now and think, 'how the hell did I manage to pull all that off, even with all my social hang ups?' I'm still not entirely sure. But I do know this. At age 30, with one friend in this whole city, I had no way of knowing I'd eventually build back to a full circle of friends and acquaintances (even if I struggle to actually see them sometimes).

Sometimes you don't know the path forward until you're walking it, blindfolded, one risky step at a time.

That old underlying belief - 'I'm not like the others' - it can be so seductive, whether it's telling you you'll never have the close friends you want, or you'll never really *feel* close with the friends you already have. The path of belonging is a path paved with tiny risks, looking for any cracks in that storyline. Any chance to remind ourselves, 'okay, maybe I *am* different, but that doesn't

mean I can't fit in.' And in my experience, that kind of knowledge doesn't come through affirmations or positive self-talk. It only comes through action. One tiny risk at a time.

So that's one half of the equation of belonging: doing what you can to join in with friends and other groups. Even when it's hard. Even when progress looks like failure.

You make the sometimes tedious, often unglamorous effort of belonging. And it's damn hard work.

You can't brag about it. Quite possibly, no one else will even notice all this hard work you are doing. But the work pays off, bit by tiny bit.

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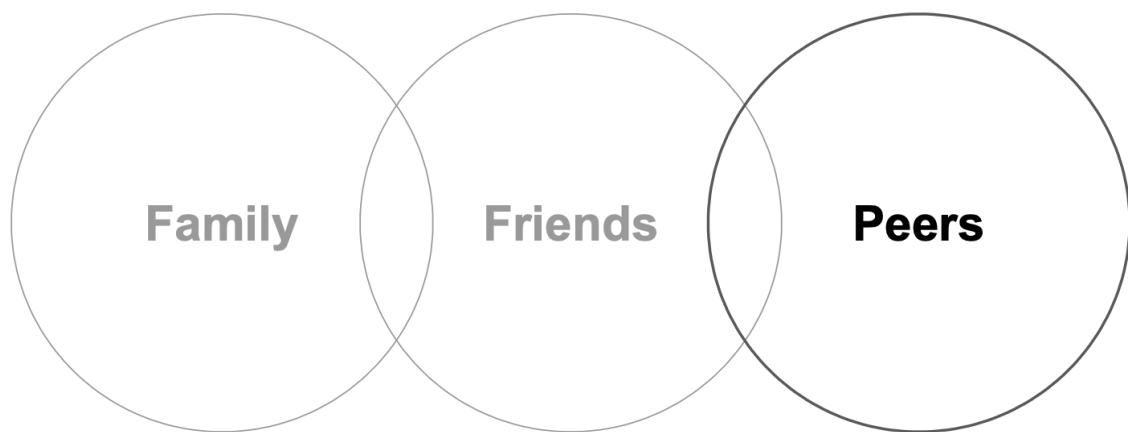
So what about the other half of the puzzle? What if you've been taking those tiny risks (and not-so-tiny risks), strengthening your friendships and other ties to the world, but you still feel really lonely?

What if you've got all the things you're told you're supposed to have - the friends, the partner, the job - and you're still half-convinced you're a total weirdo, incapable of real connection?

That's when you need the other half of the belonging equation.

That's when you need your peers.

## **PART 3: FINDING YOUR PEERS**



# UNEXPECTED CONNECTIONS

A few years ago I had a housemate named Patrick. He'd just moved to Melbourne from the US, and we needed someone to fill our spare room. So, as is customary, we had one quick chat, then handed our house keys over to a perfect stranger, hoping for the best.

What a fateful decision it turned out to be.

Lucky for us, we soon learned Patrick was an extremely nice guy with (just as importantly) a wicked sense of humour. (And we liked the same TV shows, which doesn't hurt in a domestic setting.)

Patrick and I lived together for a few months, with no idea how much we *really* had in common. Until one day the unthinkable happened.

I still remember the moment. It was sometime in the morning, a Saturday I think. My phone rang - an unknown number that I almost didn't answer.

It was Patrick on the other end, in tears. (I'd never heard him cry before.) In a small shaky voice, he asked if I could please bring some of his things to the detention center he was now being held in, before he was to be flown back home to the States, sometime in the next 24 hours.

"Um, yes? Also... what?"

He'd been on a routine overseas trip, but on the way back to Melbourne, he'd been denied entry back into Australia for visa reasons.

And that was that. My girlfriend and I took Patrick the few things he was allowed to have right away - a small plastic bag of random items, handed straight to a poker-faced security guard. They let us have about half an hour together, where we said a devastating 'goodbye forever' in the surreal confines of the lock up.

We drove home in a daze. It felt like someone had died.

## **Crisis can lead to connection (if you're willing to be honest enough)**

Through the shock of the months that followed, Patrick and I stayed in touch. We started calling and texting more. Started answering that “how’ve you been?” question with a little more honesty each time. As he slowly put his life back together, we’d talk. And a funny thing happened. Bit by bit, we learned more about each other, things we’d never talked about as housemates. We learned just how much we had in common in the way we experience the world. The kinds of things we might just as easily never have known about each other, because they’re so much easier to keep to yourself.

Amongst those few meagre items he’d asked me to bring him back in the detention centre was a box of psych drugs. Sitting on a shelf in his bedroom, an unassuming little package that - we now joke - launched a much more honest friendship.

From the day we said goodbye in the detention centre, Patrick was no longer just some guy I lived with. He wasn’t even just a friend anymore. That day we became what I call ‘peers’. Bound by shared truths that can’t be unshared.

It’s been four years since he left. He’s now one of my closest buddies - thousands of miles apart. We continue to be there for each other, sharing the stuff we’d each gotten so good at hiding.

Patrick is part of my Peers circle: people who know what it’s like to live in a brain like mine because they live in one too. Your peers give you that oh-so-important reminder that you’re not the only one who finds life this hard. More than that, at their best, peer connections offer something even more vital to a good life. A whole different way of connecting with your fellow humans - one based on radical honesty. But we’ll get to that.

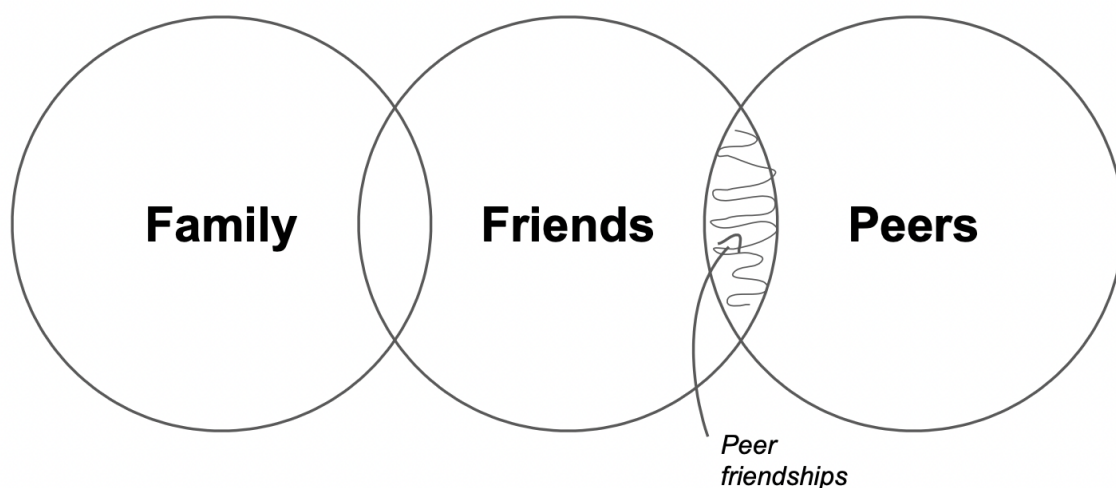
There are a few different ways to fill up your Peers circle. We’ll look at each one of them in turn.

**But first, an important note.** If you're reading this thinking 'I don't even have one person I can really be honest with right now', I would say that's a very common experience. It's sure as hell somewhere I've been myself. I met Patrick at age 33. I'd had a taste of peer connections before that, but finding actual friends I could be truly honest with has been a lifelong undertaking. It's taken years of crafting, as well as just plain dumb luck.

In this final section of the book, we'll talk a little about what I call 'peer friendships', aka, people who are both peers and friends, like Patrick is. Then we'll look at some of the other ways you can connect to your peers, regardless of whether you have any friends who fit the bill just now.

## Peer friendships

Sometimes you get lucky. You find someone who knows what it's like to live in a brain like yours, because they live in one too. And on top of that, they're someone you'd want to be friends with anyway. *Jackpot!* These are the rare souls who fit in the overlap between your Friends circle and your Peers circle.



It doesn't have to start with a traumatic life upheaval, like it did with Patrick. But these kinds of connections do often grow out of crisis. A wholly unexpected silver halo around some of life's biggest, angriest clouds.

You might have been 'regular' friends for years, only to slowly realise just how intense you both are about the same things. Or you might have met them in a situation where all the crazy cards were on the table from the start. Group therapy. A peer support group. Or sitting on a psych ward couch. And you stayed in touch from there.

For most of us, peer friendships are a rare and precious thing. In the course of a lifetime, you might find only one or two people where you think 'oh shit, this person is like me, *and* they're a really good friend'.

In my experience though, one or two people can make such a difference.

## **The good news is, you don't need a whole new friend group**

I think sometimes we have this idea that if you're 'not like the others', you need to find a whole new group of friends or you'll never be happy. A whole new group of people who 'really get you'. But I just don't think that's how it works.

We get different things from different types of friendship. My Games Night friends, or my basketball friends, when they ask me how I've been, I don't tell them what I'd tell Patrick. I don't give them the full story. First of all, that would be awkward.

"How've I been? Oh you know, mired in shame for weeks after a particular text exchange set me off for reasons I still can't fully explain. Oh and I'm also increasingly uncomfortable about just how long it's been since I came to one of these hangouts, so... I'm secretly convinced you all hate me? So you know, same old haha! How are YOU??"



When I was younger, I used to feel like this was a sign these weren't real friendships. That surely with true friends, I should be able to be totally honest. But the older I get, the more I think there's value in having friends who I'm *not* 100% completely honest with. A place I can go and hang out and eat dinner and behave like a perfectly normal human, even when I'm feeling blown apart inside. It's worth saying, not everyone enjoys these kinds of friendships, so this might look different for you. For me though, these not-so-honest friendships offer a little island of respite in an ocean of big feelings.

And in one sense, I'm not actually faking anything with these friends. I'm just showing them a different side of myself. The playful, sociable side that *is* still in there, even when I'm really in my head. He just needs the right conditions to come out, and these are friends who help create those conditions. (When I let them.)

So if you're feeling like your Peers circle is a little empty, you don't need a wholesale reset on your friend group. You don't need ten different people you can give the full story to when they ask a polite "how are you?"

But...

You do need one or two.

## **One or two 'peer friendships' can make all the difference**

Here's the thing. While you don't need to be honest with every friend about what really goes on in your head, if you're not able to be honest with *any* of your friends, that's a lonely place to be. That's when 'faking it till you make it' can start to feel like just 'faking it, full stop'.

There's something incredibly helpful about having just one or two people you can be a little more honest with (at least some of the time). One or two people who, when you *are* honest with them, don't freak out and start immediately trying to 'fix' the situation.

One or two people who ‘get’ it, because they’ve been there too. So how do you nurture these kinds of friendships, and what do they look like? A few thoughts.

## **Peer friendships are rare**

Okay, we’ve covered this, but I feel it’s worth saying again. If you’re out there thinking, ‘Help! All my friends are perfectly normal!’, this is a very common experience on the path. Finding your peers takes time, which brings us to...

## **Peer friendships are a long game**

The most long-standing ‘one’ in my ‘one or two’ is my mate Gareth. I’ve known Gareth for fifteen years, and our friendship has changed a lot in that time.

When we first met, he was actually my supervisor at work. We were working in mental health - both of us in roles where we were explicitly drawing on our own mental health stuff as part of the work. So in one sense, our crazy cards were already on the table.

But for many years, our friendship remained largely professional. I certainly didn’t imagine that years later we’d become not only close friends, but would routinely share some of the most intimate details of our lives as we each continue walking the big feels path. He’s become one of the main people I call when things get really tough or confusing, and he calls me when things are rough for him. But that took us years to get to.

## **Peer friendships are often driven by crisis**

My friendship with Patrick changed completely on that day he had to leave the country. Likewise, with my other peer connections, it’s often been some kind of crisis that brings us closer.

With Gareth, our friendship really kicked into another gear when I went through my divorce in my early 30s. By that point, Gareth and I were living in

different countries, no longer working together. But I discovered he was someone I could call and tell about the ten thousand layers of shame and guilt I was soaking in daily. For a while there, we spoke once every week or two. I could tell him just how intense it all felt, how close to the edge it was pushing me. And he never once freaked out. He just listened, and gently reminded me I didn't have to have all the answers yet.

Then, some time later, Gareth went through his own big break up, and I was able to offer much the same back to him, again down the phone line from miles away. This beautiful, mutual flow of shared learning on the path.

These days I'll call him up in dire straits, and somehow within half an hour we're both laughing about how similar our experience of the world can be. It's not that either one of us has 'the answer'. As we say at the [Big Feels Club](#) (the online community my girlfriend and I made just for sensitive cats), "Sometimes the answer is finding someone else asking the same, big questions."

## **Peer friendships don't have to be high contact**

Peer friendships come in all shapes and sizes. You might be in regular contact, especially if one or both of you are having a really hard time. But equally, you might just check in once every few months, or years (convinced the whole time that you've personally ruined the friendship of course, right up until you get back in touch).

And you don't always have to talk about the hard stuff. With Patrick, my former housemate-turned-confidante, our text chats mostly revolve around random thoughts on *The Sopranos* or sharing dumb jokes from Twitter (ideally, dumb jokes from Twitter about *The Sopranos*). Often, life gets in the way of actually talking to each other as much as we'd like. But we both know that if we do ever need to talk about the hard stuff, we'll find the time

eventually. In the meantime, just knowing he's out there helps me feel less alone in the hard stuff.

With peers, you also have the chance to 'hack' your friendships in a way you normally can't with regular friends. For instance, with Patrick, we eventually figured out we are both often convinced the other person is angry or disappointed with us, for no good reason (Barrier to Belonging #3 - We forget belonging easily). So we now have a 'pinned text' in our message thread, where he's written 'remember: I don't hate you.' Just this one little workaround has been surprisingly useful for me when the internal noise gets inevitably loud and might normally stop me reaching out.

## **Making peer connections means taking risks**

All of the above may still leave you thinking, 'yeah sure but how the hell do I find more peers??'

Sometimes they're right in front of you. I'll share a story a Big Feels Clubber once shared with me.

She's a school teacher in her mid-30s. She told me she'd always struggled with depression, from as far back as she could remember. But she'd never told anyone close to her about it. She'd seen a GP and tried the usual medications, which sort of helped but sort of didn't. But that was the only person she'd been honest with.

'My life is fine, what have I got to be depressed about?', she'd think. And strangely enough, this thought didn't make her feel any better.

Then she told me something quite remarkable. She said that in the past year, everything had changed. She'd opened up to her mum about how she was feeling, and had gotten an unexpectedly nourishing response. She'd then told her sister, and found out that they'd both struggled with feelings of depression for years, they'd just never talked about it. And finally, she started seeing a

therapist regularly, through a free program she was lucky enough to access through her work. In one year she'd gone from having no one she could be honest with, to having three people, including one of them, her sister, who was living through much the same stuff.

The big feelings didn't magically go away, but suddenly there was more room for them in her life and relationships. No longer just this private pain, hers to bear alone.

## **Finding a way into a more honest conversation**

I asked her what prompted her to start being more honest. She told me she'd been reading the Big Feels Club newsletter for a while (our semi-regular salvos about the 'life + big feelings' equation). And there was one particular issue that jumped out at her, [a piece I wrote](#) about what I call 'the Long Slow-Twisting Shame Spiral.'<sup>2</sup>

The Long Slow-Twisting Shame Spiral is my name for when you start to feel awful for no good reason, convinced you're the worst person in the world. In the piece, I explain how this experience might start with something simple enough. A mistake at work. An awkward exchange with a friend. But once it really takes root, the Long Slow-Twisting Shame Spiral can leave you stuck in that 'I'm an awful person' place for days, weeks, or even months at a time, no matter how good your life looks 'on paper'.

*(Ouch.)*

This Big Feels Clubber I was talking to, she'd read that piece, and then, with heart racing, she'd sent it to her family. (Not typical behaviour, she said!) She told me, "I couldn't tell my family I was depressed. I was sure they'd say something like, 'well what have you got to be depressed about?' The word depression was just too *heavy* for us to really have that conversation. But I *could* tell them I was in a Long Slow-Twisting Shame Spiral."

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<sup>2</sup> [Read it here.](#)

She'd found her way in. An opener for a conversation she'd been waiting to have for years. And she ran with it.

## **A different kind of risk**

It could have been any number of articles or internet jokes about feelings that ended up opening that conversation with her family. But here's what jumps out to me from that story: it's the risk she had to take, whatever the catalyst happened to be.

Her willingness to send that article to her mum and sister, a terrifying prospect I'll bet. She'd probably thought about doing something like this many times before she actually did it. She'd learned to hold the hard stuff by herself, like so many of us learn to do. It's a useful skill - a life-saving one, in fact. But it's bloody hard work. So eventually, something had to change.

In Part 2 of this book, I talked about those tiny risks we have to take with our friend groups, time and again, to find our way back to belonging. But when it comes to making peer connections, it's a different kind of risk, one that can feel some orders of magnitude greater.

## **Honesty doesn't always feel good**

Humans are complex creatures. And relationships between humans? Even more complex, since they house the complexity of not one but two whole humans, with their ups and downs and different life experiences.

The truth is, your attempts to be more honest with your friends will not always lead to more closeness. For every story of someone taking that risk, being vulnerable, and reaching a wonderful new shared understanding, I hear Big Feels Clubbers' stories of reaching out, getting blank stares or worse, judgement and unwanted advice.

There are few things more painful than reaching out with our softest spots on display, only to be rejected, or just plain misunderstood.

Most of us know this from experience. And yet, there is a flipside to this exquisite risk: the life-changing possibility of being heard. Of being seen, and not turned away from in our pain. The chance to find someone else who truly ‘gets it’. All I can say is that, over many years, I have found that on balance this is a risk worth taking, all things considered.

## **The vulnerability hangover**

Then there’s the very real possibility that things do go perfectly well - you have a deeply nourishing, honest interaction - and you still feel weird afterward.

My girlfriend Honor has a phrase for this. She calls it the ‘vulnerability hangover’.

It might strike immediately, or a day or two later. It’s the feeling of being exposed. That ‘did I really say that?’ feeling.

I still get vulnerability hangovers, and I write and talk about my feelings for a living. I’ve come to see it as part of the process. We’ve had so much practice at pretending, at tucking things away. Many of us had childhoods that actively taught us to keep our most tender feelings hidden (or else). Is it any wonder it feels strange and unfamiliar, when we let some of those hidden parts be seen?

## **Peer friendships are mysterious**

One final point on peer friendships. There’s an element of luck, even grace about when and how you find these connections. It’s a bit like looking for ‘The One’, except there’s no ‘Tinder for big feelings’.<sup>3</sup>

I met Patrick because we had a spare room going right when he needed one. I met Gareth because, at the tender age of 23 I had a total nervous breakdown

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<sup>3</sup> App idea? I’m now taking expressions of interest in early investment. DM me.

and then six months later decided - for reasons I still don't fully understand - that working in mental health was the answer for me. Gareth had taken just the same steps himself, and so our paths crossed, and we've decided to walk alongside each other ever since. I could never have planned it that way.

But lately a funny thing has happened.

Just in the last couple of years, my Peers circle has swelled. My usual 'one or two' number has become a frankly exorbitant four or five. In practice, I don't chat to all of them regularly. After years of cobbling together what I can, though, I feel like I'm getting better at finding and nurturing these rare connections.

I can't say exactly why this change has occurred, but I have a few clues.

Some of it's just age, I think. As I hit my late 30s, friends have had time to catch up and have crises of their own. Divorce. Traumatic experiences in childbirth or early motherhood. Death of loved ones. The stuff of life that can pull you apart completely, whether or not we think of them as 'mental health' crises. I've found more and more common ground in the hard stuff with friends I never would have thought of as big feelers before.

But I hear from plenty of Big Feels Clubbers older than me who say, 'I don't have a single friend I can be truly honest with.' So it's not just age that's led to my newfound plethora of peer connections.

## **The snowball effect**

I think there's a snowball effect.

For years, I had no one I could be truly honest with about what goes on in my head, other than mental health professionals (who, even if they had been through similar things, usually didn't say so). So I felt fairly certain I was just a big weirdo who should keep all this stuff to myself.

*Naturally.*



Over time, cracks began to form in that story. I took tiny risks to be just a little bit more honest, with friends, with strangers. A drunk conversation at a party that I'd hope no one remembered. A moment of honesty born of sheer desperation.

These risks would sometimes lead to nourishing conversations. And often they'd lead to nothing - sometimes literally. At age 23, I told my best friend I was close to the edge. He was overwhelmed, and had no idea what to say. So he stayed completely silent for the rest of the car ride, and we never spoke of it again.

Somehow, I managed to tell another friend who had a much more useful response. She told me her brother had been suicidal. She didn't have any advice for me, she just started crying, and strangely that made me feel a lot less alone.

These were my first fledgling attempts at honesty. They were awkward, deeply painful at times, and at other times supremely encouraging. I was learning how to be honest, step by awkward step. Learning who I could be honest with. Learning how to even begin to put words to things that, so often, seem unspeakable until you're speaking them.

So here's the snowball effect. That honesty led me to Gareth, the first true peer who I would also call a friend. Even then the snowball was still small. Our friendship grew slowly, tentatively, nowhere near the 'full-disclosure' friendship we now have, fifteen years in.

It's only this last year or two I'm seeing the snowball effect really start to kick in. One honest friendship gave me the courage to be more honest with other friends or potential friends. In this way, one peer friendship has led to another, and then another, and suddenly (not suddenly at all) my Peers circle has swelled. The sensitive cat's well and truly out of the bag.

Back in that car with my friend at age 23, sitting in agonising silence, I never could have seen this coming.

## **Building your honesty muscle**

In the Friends section of this book, I wrote that belonging happens in increments. That you slowly build your ‘belonging muscle’, by taking those tiny risks (like messaging the thread you’ve been ignoring for months).

I think with Peer connections, we’re building our *honesty* muscle.

It might be as simple as answering the ‘how are you?’ question with a tiny bit more honesty than I normally would. These moments of vulnerability are often missed, often passed over, and that can sting. But sow enough of these seeds and you never know what they might grow into, some days, months, or even years down the road.

The good news is, it gets easier the more you do it.

But if you don’t have any peer friendships right now, or any regular friends you feel you could be honest with, where do you start? How do you start to work your honesty muscle, if it’s been a while?

How do you get that snowball rolling?

# **STRANGERS CAN OFFER VITAL PEER CONNECTIONS**

It's a wonderful thing when you find someone who's both a true peer and a true friend. But let's face it, this is not always readily available, and like I said, it's a bit like waiting for 'The One'. You can't snap your fingers and make it happen.

The good news is there are other ways to connect with your peers. The 'one or two people you're more honest with' don't have to be close friends, or even friends at all. In this final section of the book, we'll look at some of the ways that connecting with total strangers can still offer you that all important reminder you're not the only one who finds life this hard.

Some of these connections might turn into genuine friendships over time, or they might be where you practise building up your honesty muscle, for friends you haven't met yet. And for some, these peer connections with strangers might be all you need, in and of themselves.

## **Sometimes strangers help you feel less strange**

You're at a party. You find yourself in the corner, chatting to one person for most of the night, and neither one of you has any interest in mingling any further. Because you've hit on something real.

For whatever reason, one of you was bold enough to take one of those tiny risks and say something a little bit honest about yourself. Through dumb luck you stumble into one of those "oh my god, me too!" conversations, and then never see them again.

This is a peer connection. Again, you can't plan it. But you'll remember it long after it happened. A touchstone. A small reminder that your peers are out there, even if you don't always see them.

Then sometimes you have to be more deliberate. The time-honoured method is group therapy - deliberately seeking out regular contact with other sensitive cats, in a structured setting. These days we actually have more options than we used to for this kind of thing, but most people don't realise this. In recent years, there's been a quiet revolution in the tucked-away corners of the mental health system, with the growth in popularity of something called 'peer support'.

In a nutshell, peer support is just what it sounds like. Sensitive cats helping other sensitive cats through the hard stuff. Unlike group therapy, peer support groups aren't actually run by a therapist at all. Instead they're run by peers - sometimes as part of the mental health system, and sometimes as a kind of underground network, an alternative to more traditional supports. Alcoholics Anonymous has been doing this for nearly a century, so it's hardly a new concept, but peer support is gaining more visibility in Australia and other countries, as well as a growing evidence base saying it can be extremely helpful.

## **Peer support: to be seen, without judgement**

One example of group peer support is Alternatives to Suicide, a model of peer support with chapters in Australia and beyond (many of which are now available online). As the name implies, Alternatives to Suicide is designed to be a space to talk about the *really* big and scary thoughts - the ones that make you feel life isn't liveable anymore. All the facilitators are people with their own first-hand experiences of that very thing. These groups offer people a weekly chance to come together and simply be honest about what's happening in their head, exclusively with people that 'get it' because they've lived it too.

One member of the Big Feels Club, Amie, wrote [a piece](#) for us about her experience with an Alternatives to Suicide peer group. I think this short extract says a lot about how uniquely nourishing peer support can be, when you really need to find others like you:

*There were six of us on the Zoom call.*

*The group started with an introduction by the facilitators. They mentioned how they'd both had their own experience of suicidal thoughts and attempts, and that being facilitators didn't necessarily mean that they wouldn't share what was going on for them as well.*

*There was a short period of silence, waiting for the first person who felt like sharing. Then, when someone did start talking, there was a kind of comfortable attention given to them - the space to just talk, and be heard.*

*It was an extremely accepting, open space.*

*The funny thing? There wasn't actually a lot of talk about suicide itself - it wasn't really necessary. Once you take the focus off suicide, the discussion can tackle the bigger questions. Why do people feel this way? What would need to change in their life to not want to die? What is keeping them alive?*

*Eventually, and with a little encouragement from one of the facilitators, I shared a bit of what was going on for me. I stumbled over my words trying to explain the turmoil in my head, but it didn't feel like that was a problem. Unlike in the hospital room, where I'd had a similar task of sharing a bit of myself with a group of strangers, I felt accepted and understood.*

*No one wanted to figure me out. No one wanted to take responsibility for my life.”<sup>4</sup>*

To me, Amie's words here really capture the radical opportunity offered by peer connections. We learn from such a young age how to hide our sensitivities and our big feelings. We learn to make our pain invisible. So often, we learn

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<sup>4</sup> Read [Amie's full piece here](#).

this lesson simply to survive, in a world (or a family) that doesn't know how to hold us and our experience. We learn to hold ourselves instead.

Strategic invisibility is an incredible survival tool, but it comes at a cost, because we don't *just* learn to hide. We learn to be ashamed of who we are. We learn to fear being looked at too closely. And yet, we so desperately want to be seen.

The “accepting, open space” Amie found on that Zoom call, to me this is the opposite of shame. To be listened to, without judgement. To be seen, not as a problem to be solved, or a case to be managed, but as a fellow human in the midst of life, with all its attendant complications.

This is the essence of peer support. The possibility that you could, just maybe, show a little of those parts you keep most hidden. That you could untuck yourself, even for a moment, and be met not with judgement, nor even with a ‘fix’, but with simple acceptance. What a radical act.

## **A new belief**

The more time you spend with your peers, the more that old belief starts to shift. ‘I’m not like the others’ becomes ‘*we’re* not like the others,’ which feels very different! And over time, this new belief can slowly transmute to something even more radical. The flicker of a new thought, alive with possibility.

*‘Maybe I’m not so different after all?’*

Our friends and colleagues and sports teams and community choirs can help us feel like we belong to society, even when we’re feeling awful. But it’s our peers who help us feel like we still belong on earth. Who help us feel like we are acceptable humans, no matter how big our feelings or how overwhelming our problems.

And even more than this, it's our peers who help remind us *we might even have something of value to offer others*, precisely because of what we've learned from our own messiest experiences. To sit in a room or on a Zoom call and be there *for each other*, the way Amie describes. Knitting together that accepting, open space in a shared act of creation.

If you've spent a long time feeling like you are 'the problem', the one who everybody's trying to fix, this can be a profound shift.

## Find a peer support group

In Australia, you can find Alternatives to Suicide groups in [New South Wales](#), [Queensland](#), and [Western Australia](#), with some groups available online to people across Australia. Even as I write this, more are coming in other parts of the country. There are also other peer-led initiatives across the country like [the Humane Clinic](#) in South Australia, [Brook RED](#) in Queensland, and the [Self Help Addictions Resource Centre \(SHARC\)](#) in Victoria. In New Zealand there are places like Mind and Body Consultants (my first mental health workplace!) whose services include [a peer support helpline](#) staffed entirely by fellow big feelers. In the US there are several grassroots peer-led initiatives, like the [Wildflower Alliance](#), who actually invented the Alternatives to Suicide model.

Terms to search include 'peer support', 'peer respite' (an alternative to hospital run by big feelers) and 'warmline' (a form of helpline that's often run by peers). Many of these options are low-cost or free.

Finally, there's our little feelings ship, The Big Feels Club, which I run with my partner and fellow feeler of feelings Honor Eastly. We offer monthly online meet ups for big feelers around the world. [Click here](#) to read all about these, and how you can join in from anywhere in the world. Or if you'd rather just dip a toe, you can sign up to our email newsletter by popping your email address in the box on [this page](#).

## A virtual tribe

More generally, The Big Feels Club is an example of what I would call a ‘virtual tribe’. Yes, our keenest beans come together regularly, but plenty more club members happily lurk in the background, occasionally coming to a meet up, occasionally reading one of our articles. A lot of people tell us that what they get from Big Feels is the *feeling* of being connected to other people who ‘get it’ - through our articles and podcasts, and books like this one. For instance, you can know, as you read this, that these same words have been read by thousands before you.

Countless Big Feels Clubbers have told me that even this much can be surprisingly reassuring. The simple knowledge there are other sensitive cats out there helps them feel part of something bigger, helps them feel more able to create space for big, scary feelings in their life.

In this way, books and podcasts can be part of your ‘virtual tribe’, I think. This may be my introvert colours showing, but I’ve always thought of reading a book as a perfectly social act. You’re taking a walk around someone else’s brain, after all. Reading the fully-fledged honesty of someone else’s words can help you start to flex your own honesty muscle, even if it’s just in the privacy of your own bedroom for now. And it can help you find the words you’ll need when it does come time to talk with other people (just like that one Big Feels Clubber with the Long Slow-Twisting Shame Spiral).

Buddhists have a word that fits here I think. ‘Sangha’. It basically means ‘your fellow seekers’, other people on the path to awakening, traipsing along to meditation retreats and the like. The big idea is this. As you’re seeking to find inner peace amidst the inevitable suffering of life, there are three different things you can try to take refuge in, according to the Buddhists. First, you can take refuge in the teachings - the years of wisdom built up in whatever tradition you’re following. Second, you can take refuge in the example of the Buddha himself, or whatever spiritual guru you admire.



But there's a third option, the Buddhists say. You can take refuge in the Sangha, your tribe of fellow seekers. In other words your peers. The idea here is different to the first two. It's not that you look at your peers and think, 'well they're doing so well, maybe I can too?' It's more like, 'oh look, none of us have quite got it figured out yet! Maybe that's okay?' It's the safety in numbers thing.

I think this idea of sangha or 'virtual tribe' is really important for those of us on the big feels path, and it goes beyond any one specific peer connection. Whether the peers in your life are real life humans you speak with, or people you read and listen to, or even just the *idea* of other people out there, it is so important to remember that in living a sensitive life we are part of something bigger. That feeling sad or scared most of the time is a perfectly valid human existence, with a dignity of its own.

What the virtual tribe offers, it's not 'hope' exactly. It's not 'I'm definitely going to be okay'. I think it's the bit that comes before hope. The bit that says, 'You know what? I'm *not* sure I'm going to be okay just yet, but I know I'm not the only one who feels this way. So maybe that's okay?'

...

Part 3 of this book has looked at several different ways to connect with people who 'get it', because they've lived it too. Those rare friends who share your way of being in the world. Strangers you meet once, spill your guts to, and never see again. Or groups and services that put you in touch with fellow big feelers. Each one of these methods can contribute to expanding your Peers circle. Each one helps you add that vital other layer of belonging, beyond your regular friends and acquaintances. It's the crucial piece of the puzzle that says 'maybe you're not so different after all'.

And you know what? It's not *just* about finding support through the hard stuff. There's one last aspect to this idea of belonging that I want to touch on, to

finish. Something that goes beyond just getting through the hard stuff together.

# FINAL THOUGHTS: WE'RE BUILT FOR BELONGING

Here's the thing about sensitive cats. Yes, we find other people hard work sometimes. (Okay, most of the time.) But in my experience, we also deeply value our connections with others.

In fact, I'd say that's a big part of *why* we find other people so hard - because it matters so much to us. Because we really, really don't want to fuck it all up.

There's a hunger there, for human connection in all its forms. For getting past the small talk. And there's a curiosity, too. For me, this is why peer connections can go so deep so quickly, even if it's a chat with a stranger at a party who you'll never see again. And I sometimes wonder if in fact this is the whole point.

One of my more recent peer friends has a phrase for what I'm getting at here. This friend and I, we met when we both happened to be having a particularly hard time. Over the next few months we started exchanging regular updates on how we each were doing. Wry observations, philosophical confessions. She once described our friendship as a 'hey look at this!' friendship. Meaning, we share notes on what it's like to live a sensitive life.

"Hey look at this! Here's what it's like for me. What's it like for you?"

I love this way of thinking about peer connections of all kinds. In one sense, it's really very simple. We're in this thing together, you know? Maybe we should be sharing notes?

## Unexpected tears

Near the end of a recent call with another one of my new-ish peer friends, I found myself tearing up unexpectedly. (Not something I'm accustomed to doing.)

This friend and I check in every few months. In this particular chat, I was describing to him something I cherish about our friendship. How, no matter how long it's been, we can talk about the very things I'm describing in this book - the challenges of belonging when you're a sensitive cat.

I was using a metaphor of passing a ball between us, back and forth, making the gesture as I spoke.

At an intellectual level, I said, what we're passing back and forth are ideas. He's very well read, so I'll say "I've been reading this book about trauma" and he'll say "that sounds a bit like this work by so and so", and we'll keep passing the ball back and forth, nerding out about feelings.

But there's another layer to the game, I told him. At the heart level, what we're really passing back and forth is a simple, gentle message. "You're okay, I'm okay. You're okay, I'm okay. We're in this together, you and me."

And that's when I started tearing up. It had been a big week, with lots of socialising. (I'd been doing really well with my Friends circle, having just recently dug myself out of that months-long self-imposed exile.) So I think these were tears of gratitude - that when I can muster the courage to reach out to my fellow humans, there are people still willing to have me, both the peer kind and the regular kind. Even if it's been a long while between drinks.

### **'I can still do this'**

And they were also tears of relief. That even though, yes, belonging is hard work for me, I can still do it. Really well in fact! When I manage to make it to the social event, or pick up the phone. Relief that the hard work of belonging does pay off, eventually. Sometimes in potent and unexpected ways.

My friend teared up too, when he saw my tears. I thought of that old metaphor for compassion. The image of two cellos in a music room. If one strikes the

right note, the other one resonates at that same frequency. A shared, spontaneous duet, expressing the simple fact of their common form.

## **We're built for belonging (in our own way)**

So yes, belonging is hard for us. But I think we're built for it. Just maybe not in the way other people are. The stuff others seem to find simple can, for us, be really hard. Opening a long-ignored message thread. Walking through the front door of a party. Logging into a Zoom room, even with dear old friends.

But likewise, the stuff other people find hard can, for me at least, be the whole reason for showing up. The conversation about difficult things. The chance to find connection in the hard stuff. Those "hey, look at this!" moments.

That doesn't mean that's all we get - the chats about the hard stuff. And it's worth saying that of course, even peer friendships can be awkward, sometimes especially so. They can have all the usual 'am I being too much right now' fears that afflict our regular friendships (in this case, in stereo). Again, I firmly believe we need *both* kinds of connection in our lives. Sometimes it's the deep and meaningful. And sometimes it's the simpler moments in our more regular friendships that leave us feeling the most safe and welcome.

But you'll know them when you see them, those moments of real connection. Wherever you find them, whatever form they take. The comfortable silence you stumble into in the midst of a deep conversation, when you both just take a breath together. Or the simple rhythm of dumb jokes in a group thread about who really deserves the Bird of the Year award.

## **A chance to mean something to one another**

Meditation teacher Trudy Goodman has a nice phrase on this subject, which is as good a note as any to end on. At difficult times, she says group belonging is all the more important -- wherever we can find it. An online choir, a meditation group, a long-running text thread, whatever. Goodman says what

groups give us is a chance to *mean* something to one another. And this is the key point: she says this is how we *create meaning* through hard times. We do it together. We show up for one another, and in the very repetition it becomes meaningful.

For whatever reason, for some of us, that repetition is really hard work. But you know what? That hard work matters. And we can do it, with the right encouragement.

So consider this book one piece of encouragement on your path, as you continue to do the hard work of belonging - with whichever people you decide to do that work with, whether it's many, or just a precious few. Encouragement as you fall off the wagon and spend months convinced your friends all secretly hate you again. And encouragement as you gently, slowly find your way back. The way we always do, because we must.

We are built for belonging, each one of us. It's just that it's not always immediately apparent how. We spend a lifetime finding out just what belonging might look like for us.

But we get to belong. All of us.

We get to belong.

Go well my friends. See you on the path.

# HEY, WANT MORE PEER CONNECTIONS IN YOUR LIFE?

Finding your peers can be hard work. Especially when you find socialising complicated at the best of times.

That's why we started the Big Feels Club -- somewhere you can go when life gets hard, to hear from other people who 'get it' because they're living it too.

*"A club that feels more like a big hug. A constant reminder that I'm never alone in terms of my mental health." -- Big Feels Clubber*

**Join a warm community of sensitive cats, gently nudging each other through the hard stuff.**

[Click here](#) to find out more about the Big Feels Club.