

DATA FROM A  
**2013**  
NATIONAL  
SAMPLE

**THE**  
**STATE OF**  
**FRIENDSHIP**  
**IN AMERICA**  
**2013**

**A CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE**

An in-depth survey by:



with Sea Change Strategies & Edge Research

Released May 21, 2013



[GETLIFEBOAT.COM/REPORT2013](http://GETLIFEBOAT.COM/REPORT2013)

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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This study would not have been possible without the leadership of the whip-smart research teams at Edge Research and Sea Change Strategies.

We'd like to specifically thank the following people for not only believing in the project, but also dedicating their expertise and precious time to creating the first ever State of Friendship in America report:

- ➔ **Lisa Dropkin of Edge Research** helped shape the research strategy, analyzed the data, and served as our chief quantitative expert.
- ➔ **Mark Rovner of Sea Change Strategies** was the principal architect of the study and substantively wrote this white paper.

Huge thanks also go to Lindsay Gutekunst and Emily Hahn of Edge Research for herding cats and data; to Neal Maher for the infographics and to Jenn Christenson for design.

It is our collective hope that this research contributes to a deeper and richer conversation about friendship and its role in our lives.

– Tim Walker and Alia McKee,  
Lifeboat Co-founders



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***Most people are not fully satisfied with their friendships.***

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1 Most people are not fully satisfied with or secure about the state of their friendships.
- 2 Gen-Xers and Baby Boomers exhibit markedly lower levels of overall satisfaction with their friendships than do Millennials and Seniors, indicating a mid-life friendships slump.
- 3 People who say they have more close friends are happier and more fulfilled in life than those who say they have fewer or none. Most people, given the choice, would prefer deeper friendships to having more friends.
- 4 The qualities most people look for in friends are markedly similar across demographics, including gender, age, race, and geography. Most people want friends who are loyal, are good people, and who will be there for them in a crisis. Among attributes considered least important are physical attractiveness, similar political views, and similar religious views.
- 5 Women say they have access to more intimate friendships, but they are no happier than men with the state of their friendships.
- 6 Use of social media is probably not a factor one way or the other in the quality of one's friendships or one's overall friendship satisfaction.
- 7 Those seeking more fulfillment from their friendships should invest disproportionate time and energy in the relationships they consider "close."





*If the great loves of our life form a pillar of our existence, our friends are the bedrock foundation.*

# INTRODUCTION

If the great loves of our life form a pillar of our existence, our friends are the bedrock foundation.

We live amidst an endless tsunami of media for the lovelorn, the love scorned and everything in between. Theater, film, and television would collapse without romantic drama. The economy of the online dating business alone probably exceeds the GDP of the average developing country.

It's ironic, given how dependent we are on our non-romantic friends, that we spend so little time thinking purposefully about them. This friendship blind spot is what inspired Lifeboat, a project aimed at helping people be better, get deeper and live more fully with their friends.

The more we looked at the social science of friendship, the more concerned we became that the art of making and having friends is both critically important, and in some ways endangered.

We launched this study with a handful of big questions:

- ➔ **Just how satisfied are people with their friendships?**
- ➔ **What do people look for in non-romantic friends?**
- ➔ **What do people expect from their friends?**
- ➔ **What are people prepared to give to support a friendship?**

The answers were not what we expected.

In some cases, because the issue of non-romantic friendships is rarely explored in depth, the study raises as many questions as it answers. Does having more friends make one happier? Can one improve their satisfaction with life by improving the quantity and/or quality of friendships? The correlations are tantalizing.

The study is crystal clear on one point: a deeper, richer conversation about friendship is long overdue. Our hope is that this paper will help that conversation along.



## CHAPTER ONE

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# THE STATE OF FRIENDSHIP: INSECURITY

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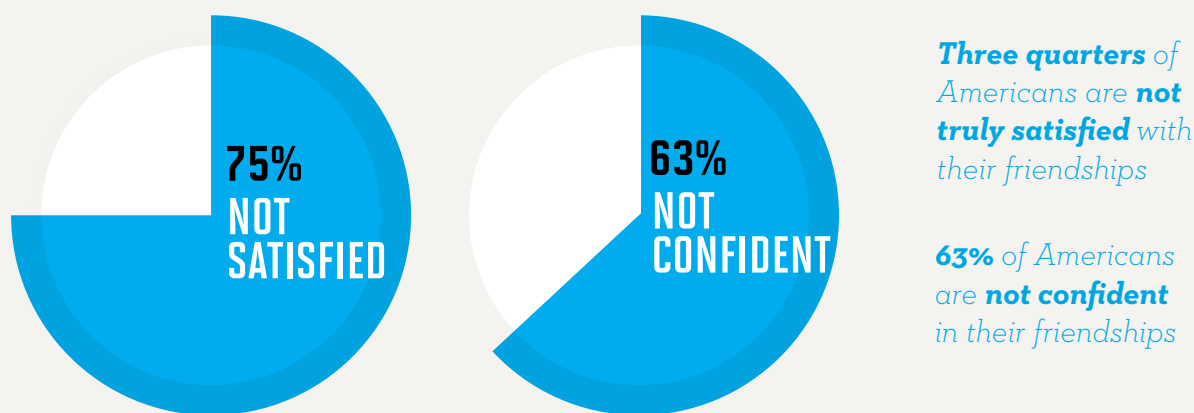




**Only 25% of Americans say they are truly satisfied with their friendships.**

Most Americans are not satisfied with or secure about the state of their personal friendships. Asked about their overall satisfaction with their friends (excluding family and romantic relationships), only 25% say they are “extremely satisfied.” Similarly, only a third of men and roughly 40 percent of women say they are confident their friends actually value their friendship.

FIGURE 1: SATISFACTION WITH FRIENDSHIPS



## THE MID-LIFE FRIENDSHIP SLUMP

There are notable generational differences in overall friendship satisfaction. Seniors (aged 70 and over) and Millennials/Gen-Yers (ages 16 to 34) are more likely to say they are extremely satisfied than are Gen-Xers (ages 35 to 49) or Baby Boomers (ages 50 to 69). (See graph below). The gap is most pronounced with Gen-X. Where 35 percent of Seniors say they are extremely satisfied with the state of their friendships, only 18 percent of Gen-Xers say the same - a 2-to-1 difference.

What is causing this “friendship slump” in people’s middle years? Arguably, life is more complex and challenging for Gen-Xers and younger Boomers, who are in



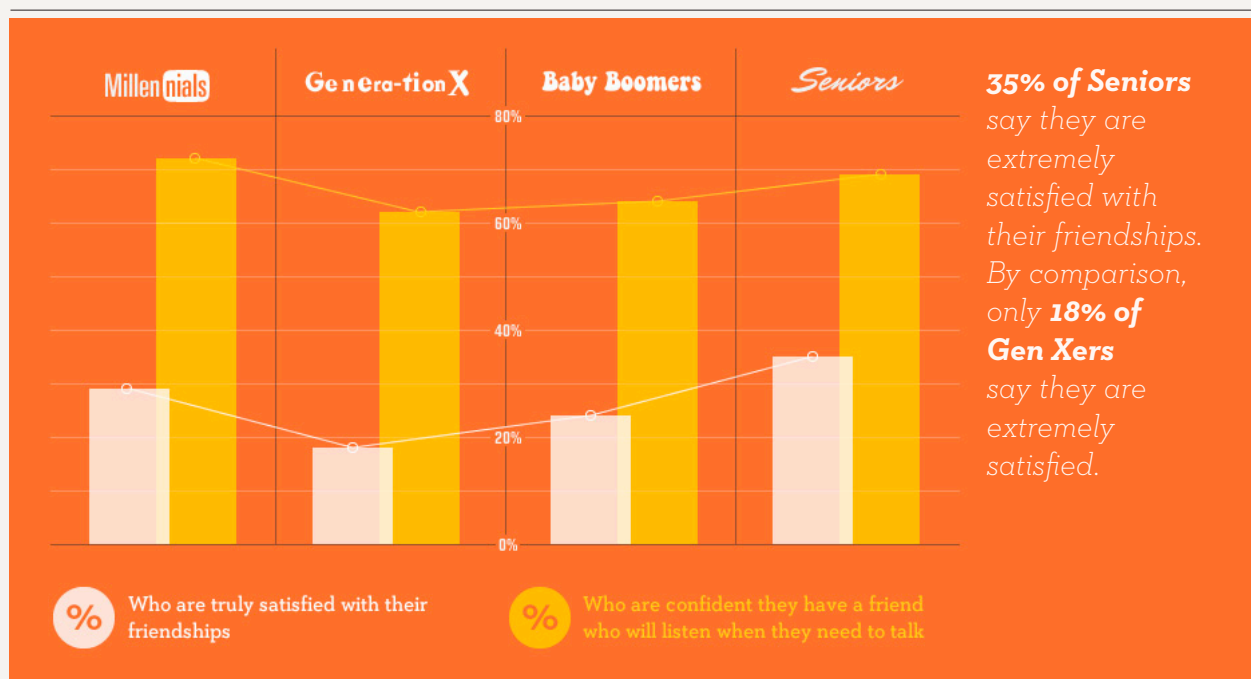


**Your generation and stage of life influence your satisfaction and confidence in friendships.**

the midst of child-rearing, managing careers, and navigating momentous social and economic currents.

Retired persons and young people, on the other hand, may have fewer distractions and worries, and can spend more time on quality of life pursuits, including friendships.

FIGURE 2: FRIENDSHIP THROUGH THE GENERATIONS



Other interesting contrasts include:

**Religious observance.** People who attend services once a week or more are twice as likely to express complete satisfaction with their friendships as those who seldom or never attend services.

**Ideology.** Conservatives (32 percent extremely satisfied) are more likely to be satisfied than liberals (21 percent extremely satisfied).

**Urban dwellers** (31 percent) are more satisfied than people in rural areas (21 percent).



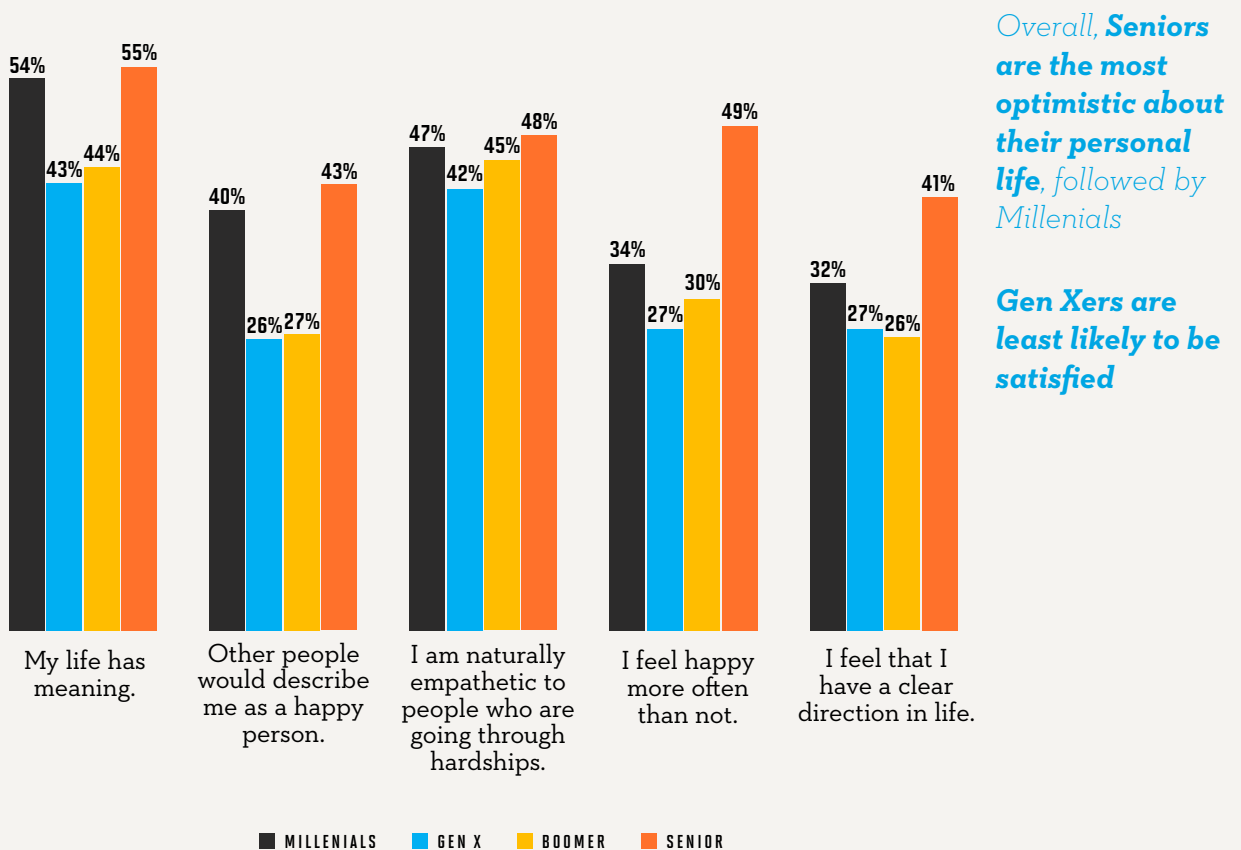


# THE MID-LIFE HAPPINESS SLUMP

Just as there is a pronounced slump in satisfaction with one’s friendships in mid-life, there is a similar pattern in satisfaction with life as a whole. Roughly one-third (31 percent) of Millennials and Seniors say they are very satisfied with how their lives are going right now. Among Gen-X and Boomers, the percentage drops significantly - to 16 percent.

In fact, the pattern holds across a range of life satisfaction measures.

FIGURE 3: THE MID-LIFE HAPPINESS SLUMP





**The more close friends people have, the more likely they are to be happy.**

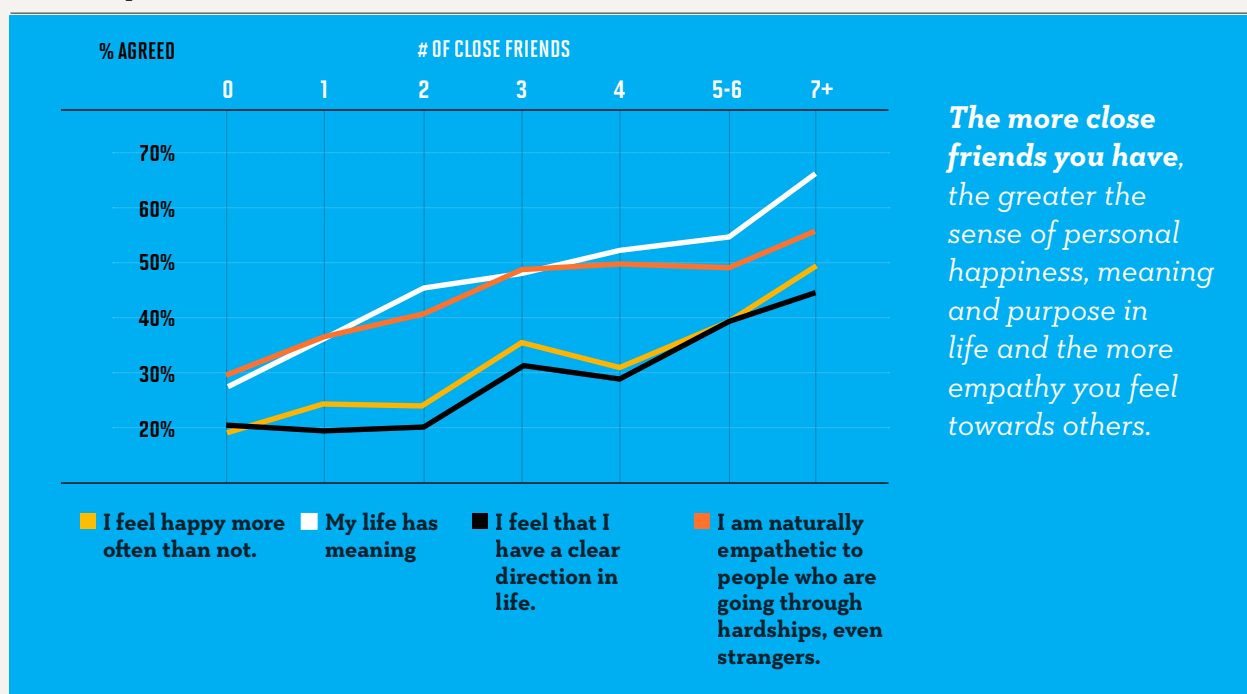
# DO FRIENDS MAKE YOU HAPPY?

The more close friends people say they have, the more likely they are to be happy. Friendship satisfaction correlates with all other indicators of life satisfaction. It is impossible to say just yet that good friends make you happy, but there is no question that happy people are more likely to have close friends.

For instance:

- ➔ Nearly half (49 percent) of those who say they have seven or more “close friends” strongly agree with the statement “I feel happy more often than not.” By contrast, only 24 percent of those with only one close friend say the same. For those who say they have no close friends, only 19 percent say they are happy most of the time.
- ➔ Two-thirds (66 percent) of those who say they have seven or more close friends strongly agree with the statement “my life has meaning.” Among those with only one close friend, the percentage falls to 36 percent. Among those with no close friends, only 27 percent agree with the statement.

FIGURE 4: BENEFITS OF FRIENDSHIPS





**48% say they would prefer deeper friendships to more.**

## **MORE FRIENDS OR DEEPER FRIENDSHIPS?**

Do we need more friends or deeper friendships to be happy? Up to a point, the answer is both.

Those with more close friends are happier and more satisfied than those with few or no close friends. The pattern is reflected in mid-life friendship as well. On average, participants report that they have four close friends. Millennials and Seniors have more close friends than Gen-Xers or Boomers, and those happen to be the two cohorts most satisfied with their friendships. Across the board people with seven or more close friends are happier than those who have fewer.

Given the choice outright, participants say they would prefer deeper friendships over sheer numbers by more than 2-1 (48 percent to 23 percent). This proportion holds for all demographic groups, including gender, age, geography and political leanings.

The takeaway is clear - close friends are the ones that matter.



## CHAPTER TWO

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# WHAT FRIENDS REALLY WANT

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**(Hint: It's not what you learned in high school)**



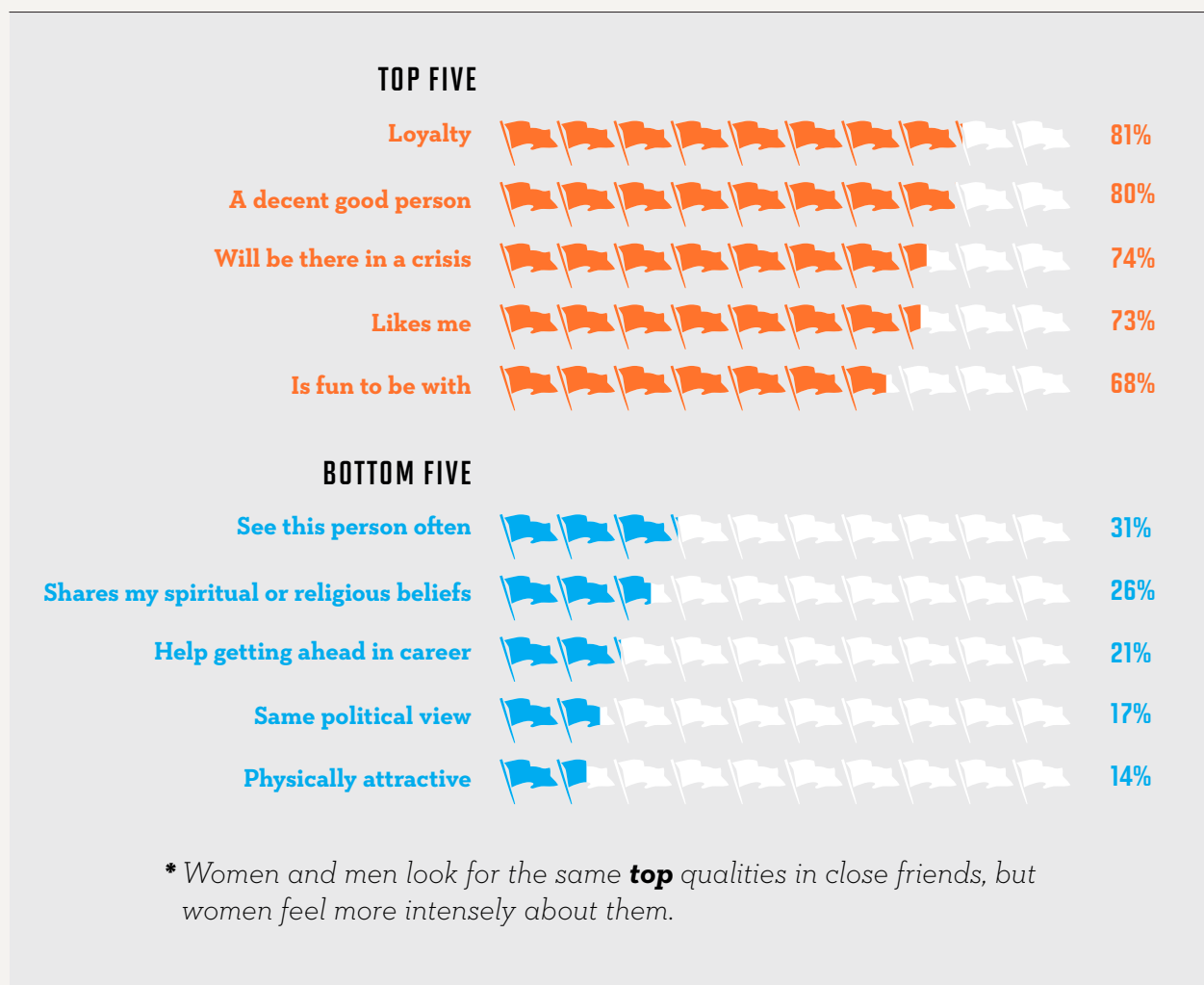


**Only 25% of Americans say they are truly satisfied with their friendships.**

Nearly everyone is looking for the same qualities in close friends, and they may not be what you might think. Among a list of 22 different attributes, most people want friends who are loyal, who are good people, and who will be there for them in a crisis. Rounding out the top five attributes are those who are fun to be with and “people who like me.”

Among those attributes considered *least* important are physical attractiveness, similar political views, and ability to help one’s career progress. Also low on the priority list are similar religious views and geographic proximity.

FIGURE 5: QUALITIES ADULTS\* LOOK FOR—AND DON’T LOOK FOR—IN CLOSE FRIENDS





**87% of women say loyalty is a critical attribute in a friend.**

## GENERATIONS AND GENDER

Across generations, people largely share the same priorities. Baby Boomers and Seniors are slightly less concerned about whether their friends like them back. Millennials and Gen-Xers place a higher value on sense of humor than their older counterparts. All in all, however, the variations are minor.

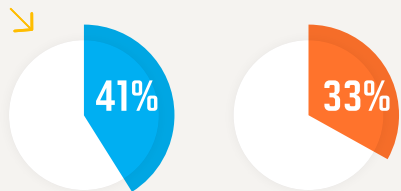
Men and women also say they are looking for the same qualities in a friend, though women express more intensity about this. For instance 87 percent of women say loyalty is a critical attribute, compared with 75 percent of men. And 81 percent of women want friends who will be there for them in tough times, compared with 67 percent of men. While still at the bottom of the priority list, men are significantly more likely than women to say they seek out physically attractive friends.

In an era in which the media often portray women as pitted against one another, women say they value a non-judgmental friendship. Almost three-quarters of women (72%) say “does not judge me or my actions” is one of the most important qualities in a friendship, compared to just over half of men (56%).

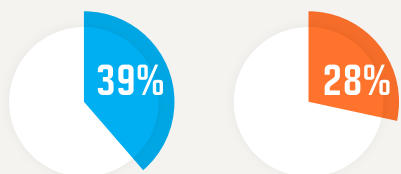
FIGURE 6: WHAT MEN AND WOMEN WANT



**Women** feel both more confident and supported overall, in their friendships, but report being no more satisfied with their friends.



CONFIDENT IN CURRENT FRIENDSHIPS



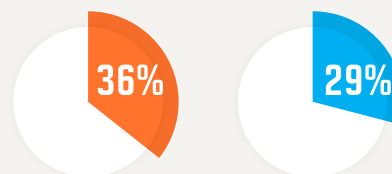
SUPPORTED IN THEIR FRIENDSHIPS



**Men** are more likely to befriend someone who can help them in their career or introduce them to new things.



WANT FRIENDS WHO WILL HELP THEM IN THEIR CAREER



LOOK FOR FRIENDS TO INTRODUCE THEM TO NEW THINGS





Women say they value a non-judgmental friendship.

# IN THEIR OWN WORDS

We asked participants in an open-ended question “thinking about the most recent person who became a close friend of yours, which 1 or 2 of those qualities really stands out about them?” The word cloud below reflects the frequency with which participants mentioned various attributes. Honesty emerged as the dominant quality people say they value in their most recently acquired close friend, followed by “caring,” “trustworthy,” and “a good listener.”

FIGURE 7: IN THEIR OWN WORDS



## CHAPTER THREE

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# WHAT DOES CLOSE MEAN?

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**(Hint: It doesn't mean confident)**







**28% say their friends often let them down or disappoint them.**

Participants were asked to respond to a range of statements assessing their confidence in their own qualities as a friend, their expectations of others, and other attitudes about friendship.

Most survey participants give themselves high marks as a friend. More than 80 percent agree strongly or somewhat with the statement “I am confident I am a good friend.” A similar number say that “I am confident I am a good friend to friends in tough times,” though there are some divisions across generational lines.

But all is not always rosy on the friendship front. And, more than a quarter (28 percent) agree at least somewhat with the statement “I have to admit my friends often let me down or disappoint me.” On that latter statement, disappointments decline with age. Millennials are the most prone to feeling let down (38 percent agree with the statement). For Gen-X, the number drops to 28 percent; Boomers, 21 percent; and Seniors 14 percent. Perhaps we get better at picking friends as we age. Or, perhaps we just come to expect less.

A similar progression can be seen in response to the statement “When bad things happen to me, I call friends first and family second.” While 49 percent of Millennials say they go to friends first, the percentage drops steadily with age. Only 18 percent of Seniors say the same thing.

When the chips are down, women are more often surprised than men by who their real friends turn out to be. More than half (54 percent) of women agree at least somewhat with the statement “I am often surprised by who turns out to be there for me.” Forty-six percent of men say the same.

## THE INTIMACY GAP

Women of all generations seem to be on more intimate ground than their male counterparts. For instance, while 74 percent of women say they have access to “someone you can count on when you need to talk,” only 60 percent of men say the same. Seventy percent of women say they have friends who can advise them in a crisis; only 54 percent of men say they do. And women are more likely to say they can confide in their friends, by a 15 point margin.



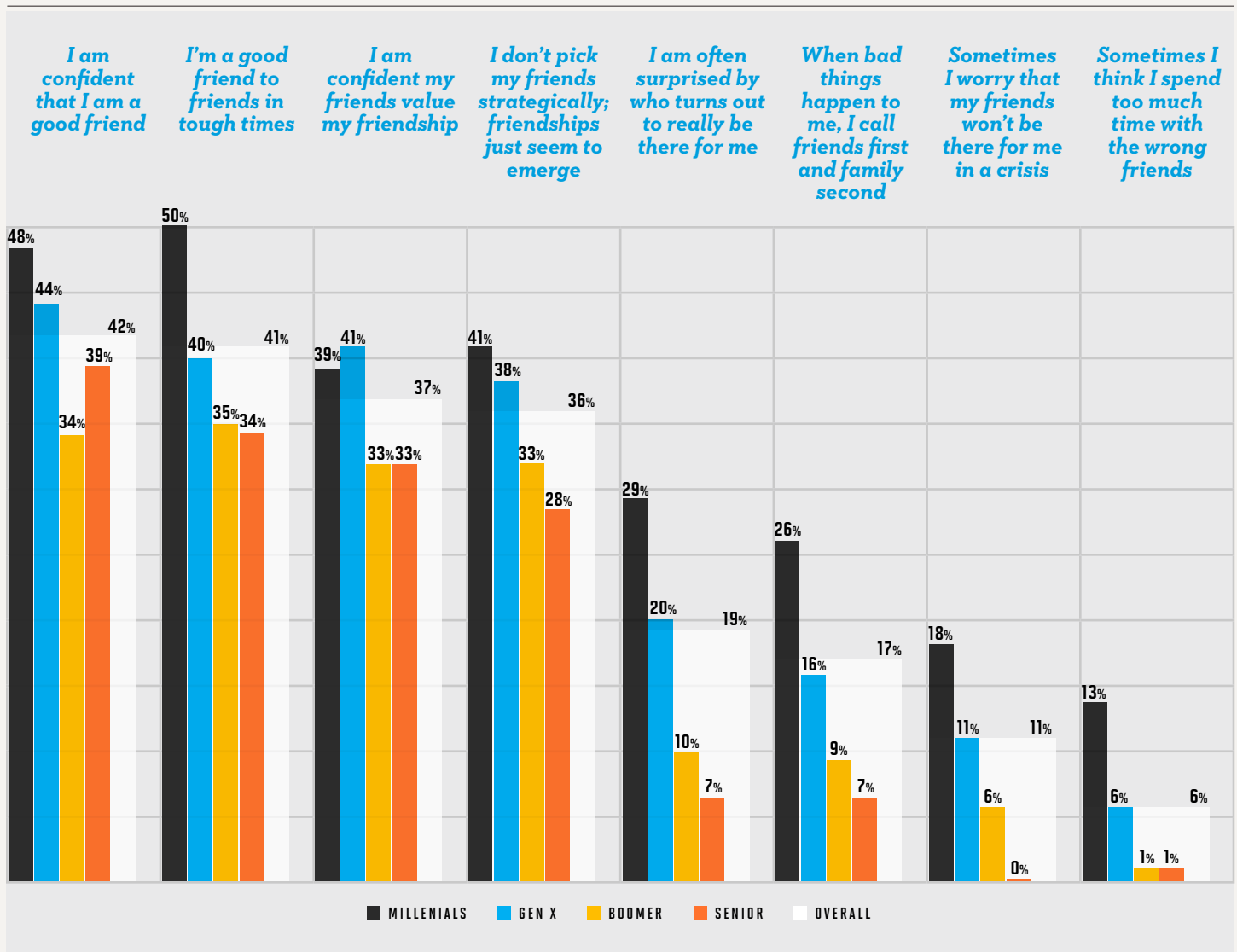


**Women are more likely to say they can confide in friends.**

To some degree the data tends to confirm the societal stereotype of women having deeper friendships than men. Some social observers characterize men's friendships as "side-by-side," akin to two passengers talking on a plane, neither of them making eye contact. Conversely they say, women have "face-to-face" contact, with all the intimacy that implies.

But that does not make women happier. While women say they have access to more intimate levels of communication, at the end of the day their level of satisfaction with their friendships is no different than men's.

FIGURE 8: FRIENDSHIP THINKING



## CHAPTER FOUR

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# THE KIDNEY TEST





**28% say they would donate a kidney to a friend.**

Just how far are you willing to go to help a close friend in need? We asked how likely respondents would be to engage in several “high bar” activities ranging from loaning money to donating a kidney to forgiving a lie.

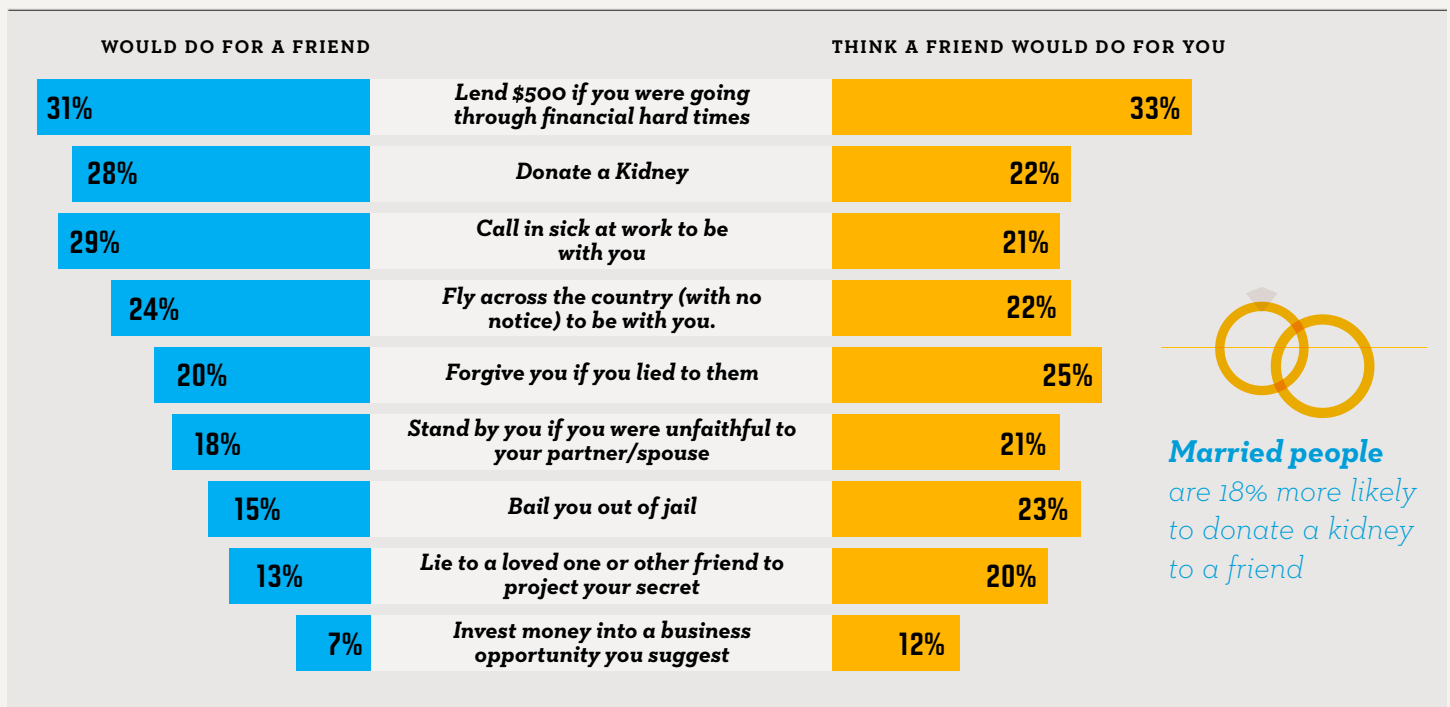
As the chart below shows, a third or less of participants say they are prepared to do any of these things. Nor do they expect extraordinary acts of kindness from others. In general, participants were slightly more likely to think a friend would do them a big favor than they would be to do it for the same friend.

The high water mark here is about money. Nearly one-third of participants say they would loan \$500 to a friend going through tough financial times. Twenty-eight percent say they would donate a kidney.

By contrast, fewer than one in five say they would stand by a close friend who was unfaithful to their lover or spouse. Only 15 percent say they would bail a close friend out of jail. Participants are least likely to invest in a business a friend is starting or to lie in order to protect a friend’s secret.

The issue of forgiveness revealed some interesting differences. Participants who attend religious services at least weekly are more than twice as likely to say they would forgive a friend for lying to them.

FIGURE 9: FRIENDSHIP FAVORS



## CHAPTER FIVE

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# WHERE DOES SOCIAL MEDIA FIT IN?

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**(Hint: It doesn't seem to matter)**



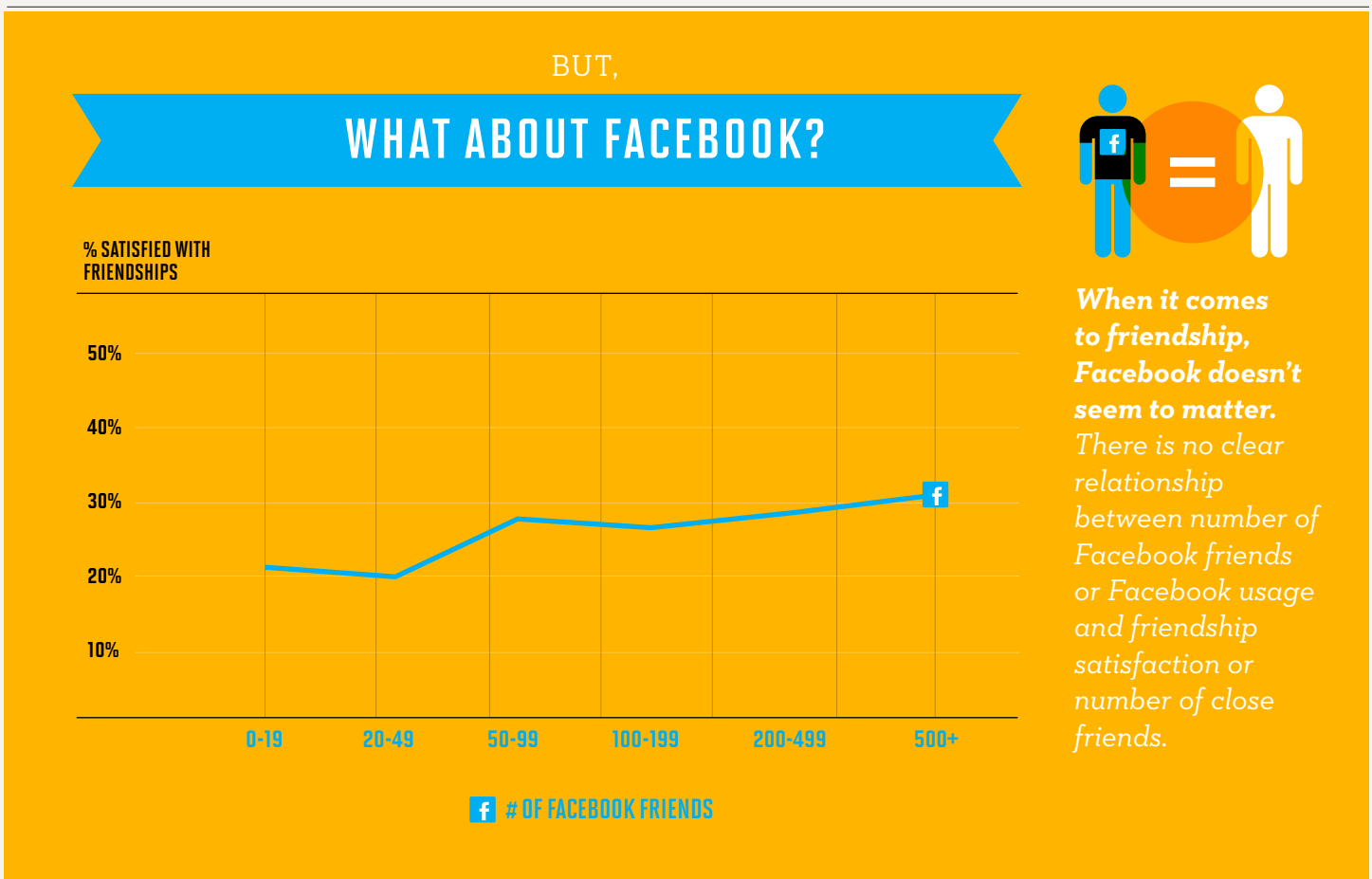


*Social media appears neither to help nor hurt in establishing or maintaining stable friendships.*

A debate rages today about whether Facebook and other social media are help or hindrance when it comes to establishing and maintaining stable friendships. Our survey results suggest the answer is, in fact, neither. Social media appears neither to help nor hurt.

We looked at Facebook in particular. The survey suggests that: no clear relationship was found between number of Facebook friends and overall satisfaction with the state of one's friendships. As noted earlier, this stands in contrast to the clear link between the number of close friends and overall friendship satisfaction.

FIGURE 10: FACEBOOK AND FRIENDSHIP SATISFACTION

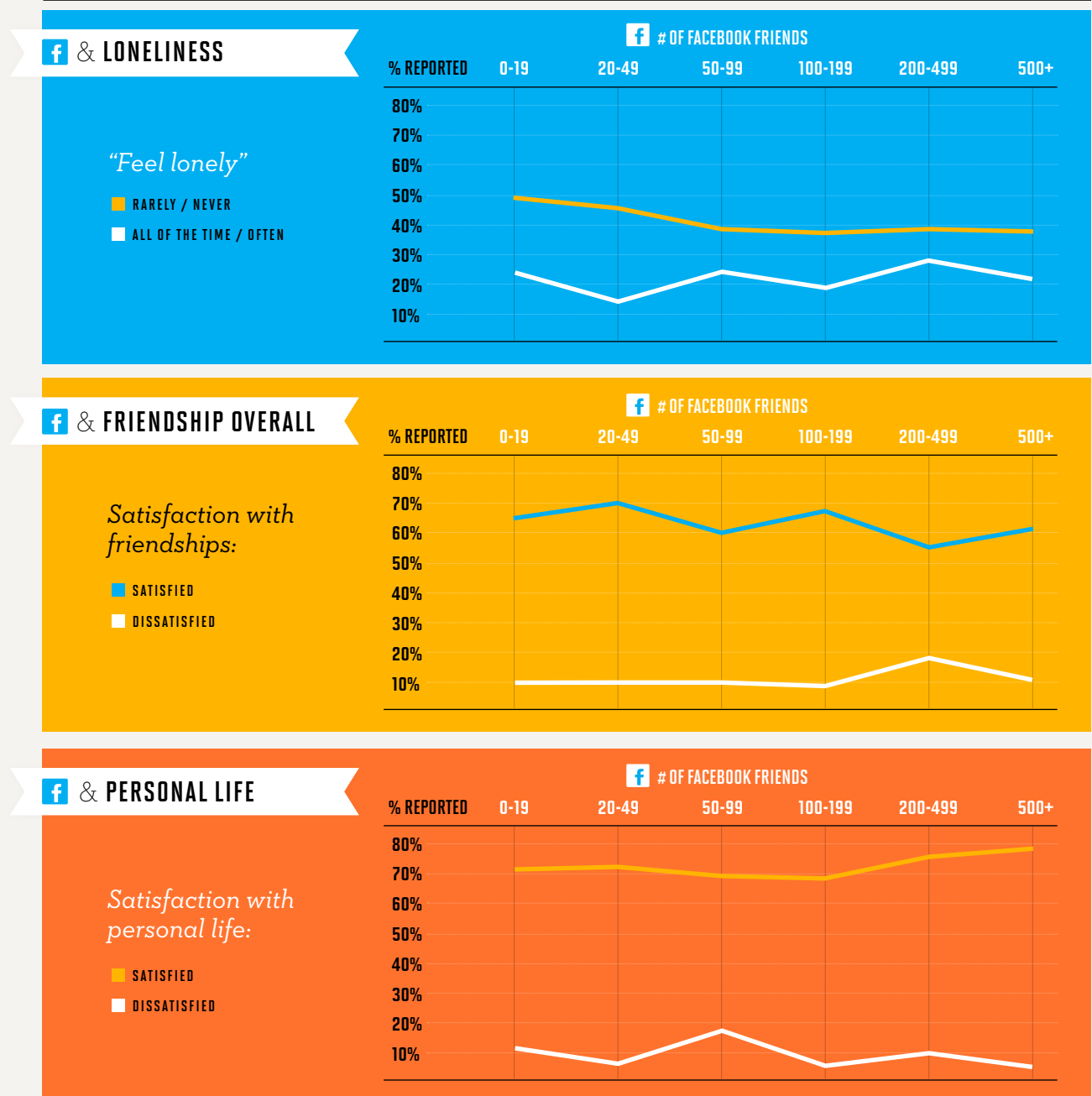




**There is no correlation between Facebook friends and overall happiness.**

There is also no correlation between Facebook friends and overall happiness. People with more Facebook friends are neither more nor less likely to feel lonely or express dissatisfaction with their personal lives.

FIGURE 11: FACEBOOK AND FRIENDSHIPS



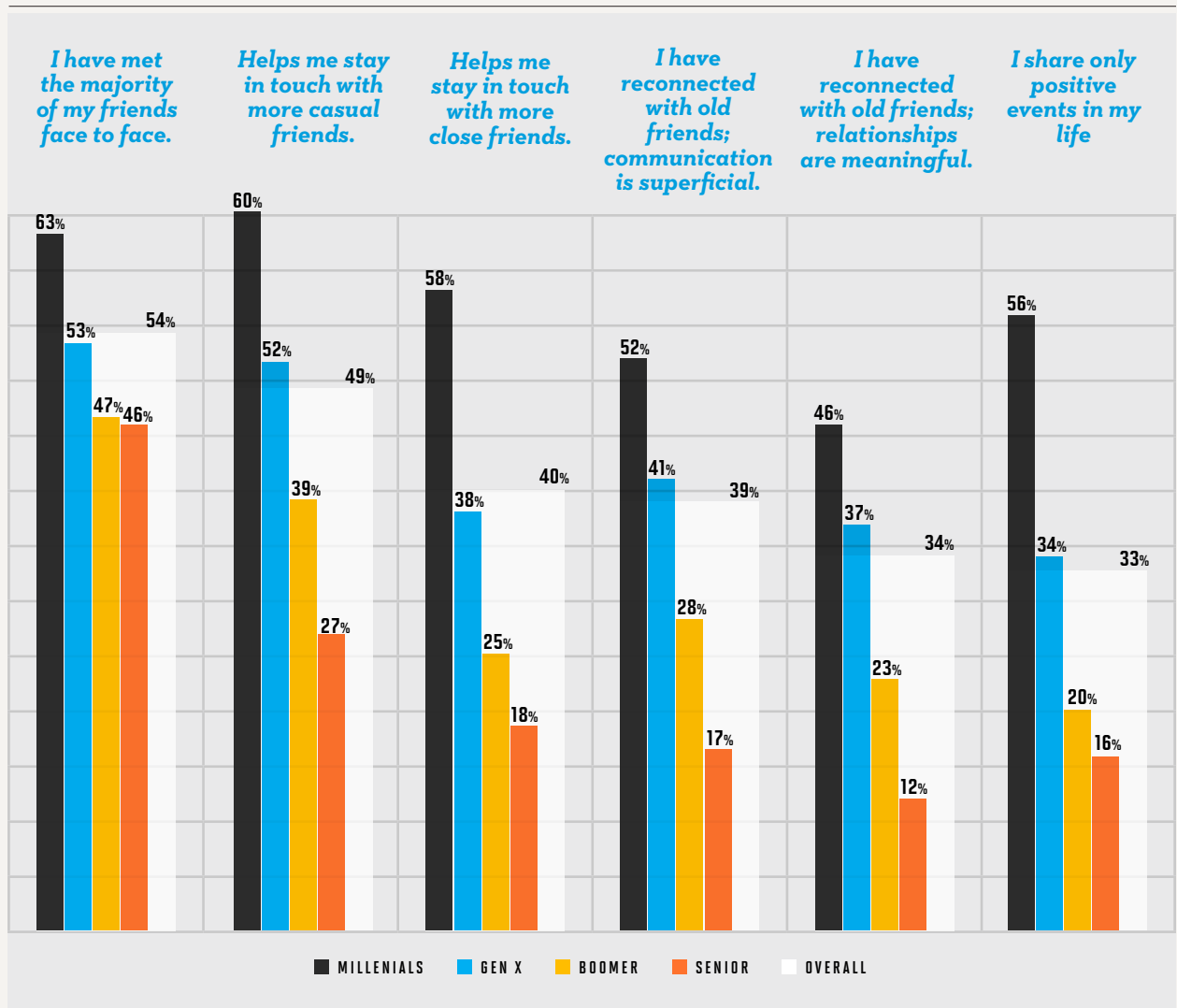


**27% say Facebook interactions have replaced personal interactions.**

Survey respondents are more likely to see Facebook (and by extension social media) as a tool for managing friendships, but not so much as a source of new real friends. More than half of those with Facebook accounts (54 percent) say they have met the majority of their Facebook friends face-to-face. And to be clear, those friendships began offline – fewer than one in five (18 percent) say they have ever met someone via Facebook who later became a close friend.

For many, Facebook is a way to keep in touch with acquaintances and friends who are less close. Half of survey participants overall (and 60 percent of Millennials) agree

FIGURE 12.1: FACEBOOK STATEMENTS—PART ONE







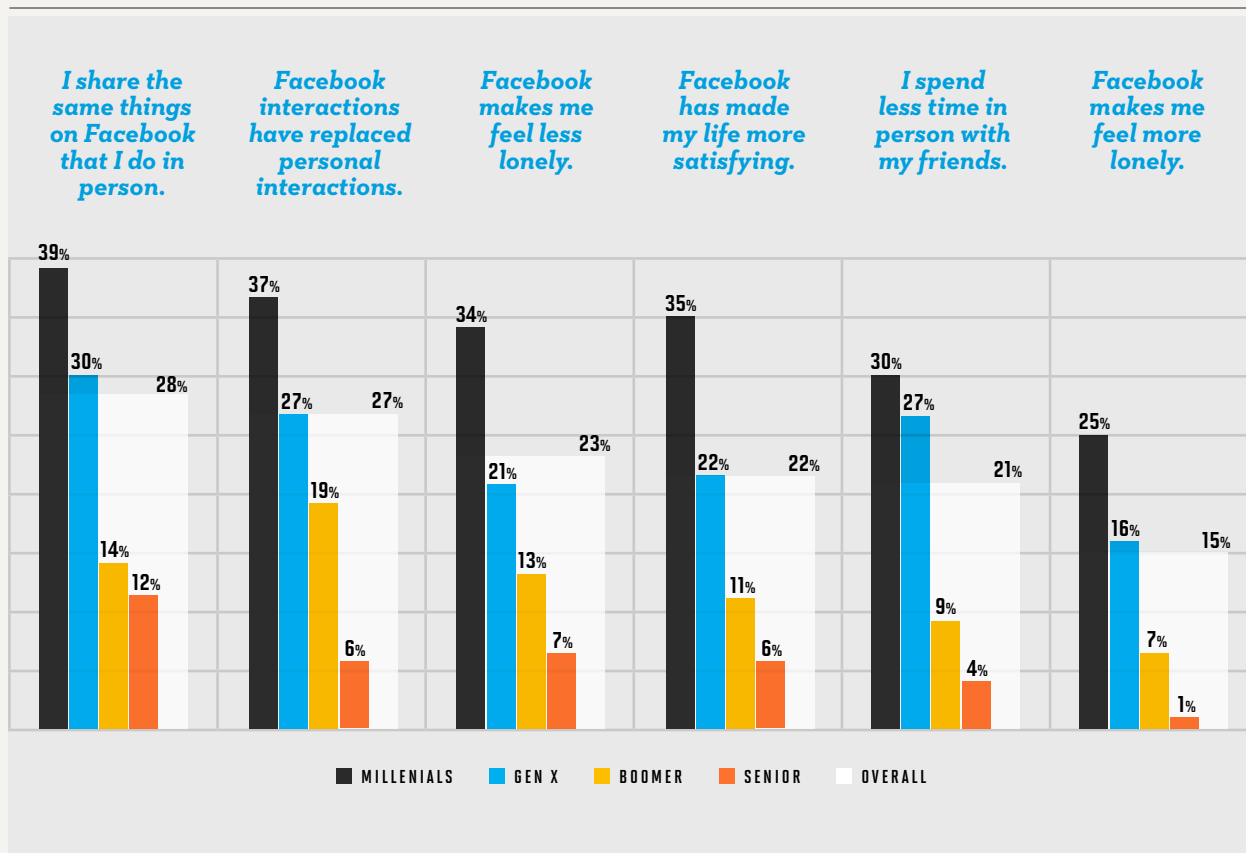
**50% say Facebook helps me stay in touch with more casual friends.**

with the statement “Facebook helps me stay in touch with more casual friends.”

Respondents’ answers also suggest that Facebook has not displaced real friendships. Just over one-fourth (27 percent) agree with the statement “Facebook interactions have replaced personal interactions.” Among Millennials that number rises to 37 percent, but declines quickly with age. Among Seniors, only six percent agree that Facebook is displacing face-to-face interaction.

In sum, our survey suggests that Facebook and social media have relatively little influence on healthy relationships and overall satisfaction with life. That is an important finding as we explore strategies for increasing both the quantity and quality of friendships.

FIGURE 12.2: FACEBOOK STATEMENTS—PART TWO



## CONCLUSION

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WHAT DOES  
THIS ALL  
MEAN?





*Close friends are what matter, no matter how one defines “close.”*

## 1 GO DEEP NOT WIDE

Close friends are what matter, no matter how one defines “close.” And with close friends, more seems to be better. People with more close friends express the highest level of satisfaction with their friendships and with life overall.

The data suggests there is much to be learned from our elders with regard to the art of friendship. Seniors have more close friends, and more fulfilling friendships, than any other generation. Younger generations may find value in developing intergenerational friendships to better understand their own social blind spot.

## 2 GIVE ONE PERCENT MORE

Avoiding the mid-life friendship slump may take an additional investment of time in friends during more challenging life stages. Retired persons and young people – who are more likely to say they are extremely satisfied with their friends – may have fewer distractions and worries and can spend more time on quality of life pursuits including friendships. Giving one percent more of your time to close friends each week (about an hour and 30 minutes) can make you feel more connected and satisfied.

## 3 GET ON THE TRUST TRAIN

Dependability matters. People value loyalty and honesty above all other friendship attributes. And, the data suggests that people who are more trusting express greater satisfaction with life.

The data also shows that people’s expectations of their friends are not uniform. Trust depends on communication. Be clear about what you expect from your friends. Take initiative by modeling behavior you would like to see reciprocated.

## 4 BREAK FRIENDSHIP INERTIA

You are not looking for “another you.” When people think about it, the qualities they seek in friends do not fall along political or religious fault lines. The alchemy of friendship is deeper than that. In the search for a group of close friends, make sure you do not cast the net too narrowly or too superficially.



## 5 INTERNET IS NOT THE EASY BUTTON

Social media is a tool, nothing more. It will neither find you close friends nor destroy your friendships.

One possible pitfall of social media, however, is the opportunity for distraction. Millennials, the so-called digital natives, are dramatically more likely to say they spend time with the “wrong friends” than their elders. This may speak to youthful inexperience, but it may also point to a risk posed by ubiquitous access to superficial connection.



# METHODOLOGY

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This report summarizes our findings from a survey of 1016 Americans ages 16 and up. The survey was conducted in January 2013 using an online opt-in research panel maintained by Survey Sampling Inc. A stratified sampling technique was used in order to get 100 survey completes in each of 10 age brackets. Quotas were maintained throughout data collection on key demographics. For analysis, we weighted the data to reflect the actual demographic and geographic distribution of the population. The margin of error at a 95% confidence level is +/- 3.1%”

The detailed results from the survey are available online at:

<http://getlifeboat.com/report2013>



## AN IN-DEPTH SURVEY BY:

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