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[The Athlete's Way](#)

# High School Popularity Might Backfire Later in Life

Prioritizing close friendships over popularity may have long-term benefits.

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Unpopularity in adolescence may be a blessing in disguise. So says a new study, “Close Friendship Strength and Broader Peer Group Desirability as Differential Predictors of Adult Mental Health,” published in August in the journal Child Development.

According to this 10-year study, prioritizing close friendships during high school over broader peer group

popularity is associated with better mental health in young adulthood. More specifically, a team of researchers from the University of Virginia (UVA) found that close friendship among 15-year-olds predicted a relative uptick in self-worth and fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety by age 25. On the flip side, adolescents who prioritized broader social popularity — and had fewer intimate friendships — were more inclined to experience social anxiety in early adulthood.

For this longitudinal study, the researchers annually assessed a racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse sample of 169 adolescents over the course of a decade — from age 15 to 25. The interviews used for the assessments explored specific details about personal friendships, along with feelings of anxiety, social acceptance, self-worth, and symptoms of depression.

High-quality friendships were defined as “close friendships with a degree of attachment and support, and those that allow for intimate exchanges.” High school popularity was defined as “the number of peers in the teens' grade who ranked them as someone they would like to spend time with, and was measured using nominations from all the teens.”

In a statement, [Rachel Narr](#), a graduate student in clinical psychology at Virginia who led the study, said: "Our research found that the quality of friendships during adolescence may directly predict aspects of long-term mental and emotional health. High school students with higher-quality best friendships tended to improve in several aspects of mental health over time, while teens who were popular among their peers during high school may be more prone to social anxiety later in life."

Although some teens maintained close friendships and popularity simultaneously, the researchers found that these two types of social success were generally marked by different personal attributes and priorities. Notably, the researchers found that neither having a soul-mate type of best friend nor being widely popular predicted short-term changes in mental health *during* high school. These differences only became apparent later in young adulthood.

Psychology professor [Joseph Allen](#), director of the [Virginia Adolescent Research Group](#), who co-authored the study, concluded: "Our study affirms that forming strong close friendships is likely one of the most critical pieces of the teenage social experience. Being well-liked by a large group of people cannot take the place of forging deep, supportive friendships. And these experiences stay with us, over and above what happens later. As technology makes it increasingly easy to build a social network of superficial friends, focusing time and attention on cultivating close connections with a few individuals should be a priority."

#### References

Narr, R. K., Allen, J. P., Tan, J. S. and Loeb, E. L. (2017), "Close Friendship Strength and Broader Peer Group Desirability as Differential Predictors of Adult Mental Health." *Child Dev.* DOI: [10.1111/cdev.12905](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12905)



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## About the Author



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