




## EP 56 - On Birthday Systems and Our Loneliness Epidemic

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*On today's episode, I explore my birthday & anniversary reminder system. Why I created it, the nuts & bolts of how it works, and the benefits it has for our relationships, soft ties, and society on a larger scale.*

### The Why

A few years ago, I realized that the number of friends (both old and new), former colleagues, acquaintances, were exceeding my ability to keep track of.

There's many who talk of the approximately 100-150 person limit of close contacts a human can reliably maintain. While I'm not overly concerned by that number,

there did seem to be a kernel of truth to it. Yet the answer couldn't be to say "no room at the inn" and drop off contact with people.

I wanted something to help me respect the past history of connection & events that formed these relationships. Something to allow me to at the very least keep a link to these people. Even if time, distance, or situations caused our paths to drift further apart.

So this is the why behind my system.

## The How

My first attempt was an expansive database. Names, contact info, connections, history, favorite sports teams, pets, birthdays, anniversaries, you name it.

From this, I developed a coding system to denote how often I should keep in touch: From the most often (closest people) to every year or two (distant acquaintances).

I set up an e-mail automation for the start of each week, reminding me of who was next up on my list to reach out. The theory being that I'd work my way through the list each week, update the database, and presto: Contact System.

Here's the thing: It didn't work. Or rather, it was too much work. Maintaining the database, forcing calls at awkward times, the coding system... It got to be too much and within two months I'd abandoned the outreach system.

Yet the desire to keep in touch remained - so I went back to the drawing board.

## The How That Works (for me)

I learned two things from my experiment:

1. Simplicity: I needed something that was both lightweight to manage, and straightforward to execute.
2. Timing: I would feel less resistance to reaching out if I knew who I was reaching out to wouldn't be getting the message out of the blue.

For timing - The birthday message was the best & most obvious. After that were wedding anniversaries or major life events.

On these dates, people tend to be more open to messages. It's a great time to reach out, check in, and wish them well.

This doesn't mean I wait a year to reach out to people - there's still family members & close friends I speak to regularly if I don't see them regularly. But I decided not to build any fixed system for this: As not all aspects of our relationships can be systematized anyway. So why add pressure to something I know I'm likely to do when I can anyway?

As for the system - I kept it simple: A Google Calendar. Within your account, you can create multiple calendars. Each calendar has its own set of options, including:

- Color coding
- Privacy settings
- Notification Reminders
- Integrations
- Time Zone
- Recurring events (useful for birthdays & anniversaries)
- On/Off visibility on your calendar views

When I post something to my "BDays & Anniv" calendar, it's added as an all-day event with an annual reoccurrence.

*It's worth an aside to mention that there was a significant chunk of time at the very start to setup this calendar, and populate it with all known birthdays and events that I had. I started with dates from the previous database, but I'd never fully populated known dates for people.*

*I'll credit Facebook for the assist here. While I'm rarely active on the platform, I maintain an account. There's a page you can navigate to that will list out birthdays for all your friends, as long as they have entered the date in their profile and shared them with friends. Turns out many do this - so this provided me a ton of dates to add into my system.*

I keep a very organized calendar, as part of my yearly/quarterly/weekly/daily time management system. (I talked about this in more detail [back on episode 13](#)). Since my calendar is front and center on a regular basis, this means I'm regularly reminded to reach out on birthdays and anniversaries.

This system is easy to maintain, since once I add an important date for someone (or myself) - and I've set it to repeat - there's no more work I need to do. I don't even need to enable notifications or alerts: I'm confident I will see the information when it's timely.

*Worth another quick aside to shout-out Notion's new Calendar tool. I've been a HUGE fan of Notion for many years - and it's come up many times on this show. It's central to how I manage my life, and their new calendar tool has quickly become my go-to. It's still early-days and has some kinks to work out, but it features robust integrations with Google Calendar, a user-friendly interface, and thankfully: DARK MODE!*

Which brings me to the most important part of any system: Actually executing on the action!

My mode of interaction really depends on: Proximity to the person, timing of when I reach out (especially during a work day), time zone differences, and my available contact info for the person. My preference ranking for contact with people:

1. In Person
2. Phone Call
3. Text
4. E-Mail
5. Facebook Message (another of the rare situations that prompt me to log in)
6. LinkedIn (used for former colleagues & weak business ties)

Something I'd like to add to this list this year: Taking the time to write physical letters. In part because I love the tactile feeling of handwriting. But also it's an opportunity to connect off-screen. I envision the recipient reading it over a cup of

tea, sitting on a couch. I can enclose photos, a sticker, or some silly memento. Consider how many unexpected letters from friends you've received lately... I like the idea of going old school.

Finally, maintaining the system is a breeze: Just add in a new event. I might realize I missed someone's birthday, I'll go back and add it in - never missing it again. Early on, there were a few dates I had wrong - when corrected, it would take only seconds - and it's never wrong again.

## The Benefits

It's important to keep up with your network.

I'm not saying grand overtures to every small acquaintance you've ever had: But say hi, check in, keep in touch.

People like to know they're thought of. How many people get mad when being wished a happy birthday?

And when life throws you a curveball and you need that network: It's more likely to benefit you if you've kept it well maintained.

It also helps me maintain people's contact information: People move, they change jobs, their family situations change.

I don't keep score with this. Keeping up expectations that those I reach out to during the year will return the favor. People have a lot going on in their lives. I don't mind being the one in a relationship who keeps in touch.

There's no doubt our society is suffering from an epidemic of loneliness.

There's a [2023 advisory from the U.S. Public Health Service](#) which contains a far deeper scientific analysis of the problems, and the many health effects of positive and negative social interaction.

While the topic is too much for this episode, it's important to note how even a simple system like this can help be part of alleviate some of this loneliness.

When something reminds me of someone: I'll ping them a quick message, reminiscing.

Many times that happy birthday message results in a scheduled meet-up, phone or zoom call, or a back & forth exchange: Truly catching up, both of you feeling more seen and reconfirming the connection.

Many times those memories & reflective conversations help our own memory: Recalling memorable moments, which can be its own joy.

I've also found the system provides some interesting insights.

Close friends sharing a birthday, or clusters like mid-November (9 months after Valentine's Day)

On a professional level, through keeping in touch I feel more connected to industry trends, the job market, and even second & third level connections.

In an era with seemingly endless tools of connection, why are we the loneliest we've ever been? Because convenience and speed often strip away depth, context, and our bandwidth.

Which is why, whenever the opportunity presents itself, I'll do what I can to move communication with someone up levels of immediacy:

Face to face > Video calls > Phone call > Email > Text > Social media DM

So: let's slow down, take more time for each other, and celebrate together!

### Episode 56 Quote:

Today's quote comes from Page 4 of that 2023 advisory, [courtesy of the Surgeon General of the United States](#), Dr. Vivek H. Murthy. I have to shout out the recent edition of [Jon Acuff's amazing e-mail newsletter](#) for bringing it my attention (and sparking the idea for this episode):

*"Given the profound consequences of loneliness and isolation, we have an opportunity, and an obligation, to make the same investments in addressing social connection that we have made in addressing tobacco use, obesity, and the addiction crisis."*