

Why We Drift Apart — and How to Stay Close | How to Live a Good Life, Episode 3

English learning resource · EN

Full episode script · English

373 lines

Study task: Listen again and notice the expressions you studied.

Last night I was looking for a photo of my passport, and I found a different photo instead.

Go on.

Twenty fourteen.

A wedding in Valencia, a friend's wedding.

And next to me, with his arm around my neck, a man called Tomás.

Who is Tomás?

Tomás was the person who knew everything about my life.

Every job, every girlfriend, every stupid decision.

Was?

Is.

Was.

I do not know.

When did you last speak to him?

I would have to check.

That is the answer.

That is the answer.

We never argued.

Nothing happened.

We just stopped calling.

And now you have a photo, and a name, and a silence.

And a question.

Why do we expect the people we love to stay in our lives without any effort at all?

Welcome to Your English Toolbox, the podcast that trains your English while you live your real life.

I am Martin.



And I am Julia.

This is the third conversation in our series about how to live a good life.

Four conversations about happiness, relationships, purpose, and the small choices that improve our quality of life.

In the first episode, an eighty-year study told us that relationships are the foundation of a good life.

In the second, we learned how to start one with a stranger in thirty seconds.

And today, the hard part.

How to keep the people you already have.

Because the strangest thing about relationships is that we lose most of them without noticing.

Let me start with two surveys, because the change shocked me.

Please.

In nineteen ninety, a Gallup survey asked American adults how many close friends they had.

Three per cent said none.

Not one close friend.

And then?

In a different national survey in twenty twenty-one, twelve per cent said none.

Four times as many.

Different surveys, different methods.

So we should be careful with a direct comparison.

But the direction is difficult to ignore.

Some people call it a friendship recession.

And most of these friendships did not end in a fight.

The people simply drifted apart.

To drift apart.

Like two boats on a lake, with nobody rowing.

Nobody decides to drift.

It just happens, if nobody rows.

So here is the mistake, and I made it with Tomás.

We believe that a shared history keeps a relationship alive.

Ten years of memories, a wedding, a thousand conversations.

But the history is the past.



And the relationship lives in the present.

It lives in the last phone call, not the first one.

I want a comparison, because I think there is a good one.

There is.

Nobody expects to run a marathon on the training they did ten years ago.

Nobody.

And yet we expect a friendship to survive on the effort we made in twenty fourteen.

The authors of the study we talked about in episode one have a name for this.

Social fitness.

Social fitness.

Relationships are not possessions.

They are living things, like a body.

And like a body, they lose strength if you do not use them.

So today is a training session.

A gym for your relationships.

Okay, before the training, the medical check.

Oh no.

Every gym does a medical check on the first day.

I have seven questions, and you have to answer honestly.

This is a trap.

It is a trap.

Question one.

Who makes you feel safe?

My dentist.

Your dentist.

He is very calm.

He has a very calm voice.

I am writing that down.

Question two.

Who makes you laugh?



My sister.

Easily.

Good.

Question three.

Who challenges you?

Who tells you when you are wrong?

My landlord.

Your landlord.

Every month.

Question four.

Who asks you honest questions about your life?

Take your time.

I am thinking.

Question five.

Who could you ask for practical help?

Moving a sofa, a lift to the airport.

My neighbour, probably.

He has a van.

Question six.

Who is allowed to ask you for help?

Who would call you at three in the morning?

And question seven.

With whom can you be completely yourself?

No performance, no good version of you.

I think you know the answer to that.

Tomás.

Tomás.

So.

Seven questions.

Two clear answers, two jokes, and three silences.



And the silences are the diagnosis.

Yes.

This exercise is inspired by the social-fitness assessment in the book, and it is not about counting friends.

It is about whether your relationships cover basic human needs.

Safety, laughter, honesty, help, challenge, and being known.

Everybody has gaps.

Everybody.

And a gap is not a failure.

A gap is a task.

It tells you where to train.

Now I want to talk about something smaller than a gap.

Something so small that we do not see it.

Go on.

Last Tuesday, my partner was telling me about a problem at work.

An important problem, a conflict with his manager.

And?

And halfway through, my phone buzzed, and I said, one second.

One second.

I answered a message about a delivery.

And when you looked up?

He had stopped talking.

And he did not start again.

He just said, it does not matter, and went to make tea.

There is no villain in that story.

No villain.

Just a phone and a second.

This is what psychologist John Gottman has spent decades studying.

He observed thousands of couples over time.

And he used a term called a bid for connection.

A bid.



Like at an auction.

A bid is a tiny request for attention.

Look at this bird in the garden.

What a day I have had.

Did you see the news?

Tiny things.

And they are not really about the bird.

No.

The bird means, are you there?

And you have three basic options.

You turn towards the bid, you turn away, or you turn against.

Towards is, oh, look at that, what is it?

Away is, hmm, without looking up from the phone.

And against is, why are you always talking about birds?

And here is the part that matters.

In a six-year follow-up of newlyweds, the couples who stayed married had turned towards each other's bids about eighty-six per cent of the time in the laboratory.

The couples who later divorced had done it only about thirty-three per cent of the time.

Not because of one big moment.

Because small moments accumulated.

So the bird is not only a bird.

It is a chance to say, I am here.

And it is not only couples.

Your child says, look at my drawing.

Your colleague says, I had a terrible weekend.

Your friend sends you a photo of a plate of food for no reason.

Bids.

All of them.

And the phone in your hand does not have to be evil.

It just has to be more interesting than the bird for one second.

Gottman's research also found what people call the five-to-one ratio.



The famous ratio.

During conflict, stable couples had roughly five positive or neutral moments for every negative one.

During conflict.

Not a weekly points system.

So two sighs about the dishes do not require ten compliments before Friday?

That is not how love works.

Good.

Because I only had three.

The point is not arithmetic.

A negative moment carries weight, so warmth and repair matter.

Small things, often.

That is social fitness.

Now, our listener has an extra complication.

The language.

The language.

Because sometimes we turn away from a bid, not from lack of attention, but because we misunderstood it.

I have a story about this.

Nadia.

Tell me about Nadia.

Nadia is an accountant from Tunis, in Tunisia, and she has been in Manchester for a year.

Very good English, very careful, very polite.

And?

In her first month, a colleague called Rachel said to her, we should grab a coffee sometime.

That sounds friendly.

It is friendly.

But it is not a fixed invitation.

So Nadia waited.

One week.

Then two.

Rachel smiled every morning, but she never mentioned coffee again.



And Nadia assumed Rachel had changed her mind.

She pulled back.

She stopped sitting near Rachel at lunch and stopped asking about her weekend.

And Rachel?

Rachel thought Nadia was not interested.

So both women read the same silence as rejection.

When neither of them had rejected anybody.

In British English, friendly phrases are often deliberately soft.

We should grab a coffee sometime may express genuine warmth without proposing a real date.

And I will let you know may be a promise, or it may simply keep the answer open.

Not bad may mean genuinely good.

The words give us clues.

But tone, context, and the next action complete the meaning.

And here is the double lesson.

In English, and in relationships, our first interpretation is not always the only one.

So how does Nadia repair it?

The authors of The Good Life offer a five-step tool called WISER.

WISER.

A useful word, and a useful acronym.

First, Watch.

Notice what you are feeling before you act.

Nadia feels hurt.

Watch the feeling.

Second, Interpret.

Question your first explanation.

Rachel does not like me.

Is that the only possibility?

Or Rachel was being friendly, but vague.

Third, Select.

Choose what you actually want.



Does Nadia want to prove that Rachel rejected her, or does she want a friend?

A friend.

Fourth, Engage.

Respond instead of reacting.

Ask, instead of retreating.

And fifth?

Reflect.

Notice what happened, and use it next time.

WISER is not about being clever.

It is about becoming slower.

And the Engage step needs a sentence.

One useful sentence when language and relationships collide.

When you said that, I was not sure how to take it.

What did you mean?

Say it once more.

When you said that, I was not sure how to take it.

What did you mean?

It is honest, it is not an accusation, and it gives the other person room to explain.

And it is the exact opposite of pulling back.

It is turning towards.

But Nadia did something even braver.

What?

She turned the vague thing into a real thing.

She said, you mentioned coffee a while ago.

Are you free on Thursday at four?

She put a time on it.

She put a time on it.

And Rachel?

Rachel said, oh, thank goodness, I thought you did not like me.

Which brings me to the last piece of training.



Rituals.

Rituals of connection.

Because Nadia's mistake was not the coffee.

It was believing that sometime is a real plan.

Sometime is where friendships go to die.

So you replace sometime with a ritual.

A phone call every Sunday at six.

A coffee on the first Thursday of the month.

A walk on Saturday mornings, always in the same park.

A voice message on the way to work, thirty seconds, no answer required.

Dinner with the phones in a drawer.

And my favourite, because it costs nothing.

Asking about something the person told you last time.

The third sentence from our previous conversation.

You mentioned your son had an interview.

How did it go?

And the principle behind all of them is simple.

If it is not in the calendar, it probably will not happen.

Now, I need to address something, because I know what you are thinking.

What am I thinking?

You are thinking that you do keep in touch with Tomás.

Because you like his photos on Instagram.

I do like his photos.

Every one.

Every one.

That is keeping in touch.

That is watching his life through a window.

Then how many likes equal one phone call?

Let me calculate.

Please.



None.

Zero.

There is no number.

Right.

Three sentences for keeping the people you love.

Listen, and repeat in the pause.

Sentence one, for turning towards.

I have been thinking about what you told me.

How is it going?

Sentence two, for turning sometime into a real plan.

Let us put something in the diary before we both forget.

Sentence three, for repairing a misunderstanding.

When you said that, I was not sure how to take it.

What did you mean?

All three again.

I have been thinking about what you told me.

How is it going?

Let us put something in the diary before we both forget.

When you said that, I was not sure how to take it.

What did you mean?

To put something in the diary is a very British way to say, let us fix a date.

It sounds small, and it may save a friendship from another month of sometime.

And our sentence of the day.

Ready?

Love is not a feeling you keep.

It is a thing you do, again and again.

Love is not a feeling you keep.

It is a thing you do, again and again.

One more time, with us.

Love is not a feeling you keep.



It is a thing you do, again and again.

So.

The photo.

The photo.

Did you write to him?

I did.

Last night, after I found it.

What did you write?

I wrote, I found an old photo of us today, from the wedding in Valencia, and I realised how much I miss talking to you.

Would you like to catch up sometime?

Sometime.

I know.

I know.

I read it back and I heard your voice.

So?

So I deleted sometime.

And I wrote, are you free on Sunday evening?

And?

And I do not know.

He has not answered yet.

Good.

Good?

Yes.

Because the training is not that he answers.

The training is that you rowed.

Here is something to carry with you this week.

The photograph of your life, twenty years from now.

The people standing next to you.

Some of them are not strangers you have to meet.

They are people you already have, who are quietly drifting out of the frame.



And they do not need a big gesture.

They need you to show up.

So here is your training plan.

Three actions this week.

Choose from the list.

A message to somebody you have been meaning to write to.

A phone call, not a like.

An invitation with a date in it.

Or a conversation you need to repair, with the sentence.

And when somebody shows you a bird this week, look at the bird.

Next time, the last conversation in the series.

Is it too late to start again?

Crisis, age, moving country, and the life you can still build.

And each episode stands on its own, so start wherever you like.

Everything from today, the transcript, the vocabulary, the WISER model, and the three sentences, will be waiting for you at yourenglishtoolbox.com.

With translations, flashcards, and downloadable PDFs, free with a free account.

Thank you for spending this time with us.

Go and look at the bird.

See you in the next one.

