✦ IDEA · CHEAT CARD · SOCIETY

Dunbar's number

The proposal that a person can keep only about 150 stable personal relationships at once, because of limits in the brain.

How it works

1. Keeping track of people takes brain capacity and time for every relationship.
2. Monkeys and apes with a larger neocortex live in larger groups.
3. The human neocortex, put into the same equation, predicts groups of about 150 people.
4. So a person's stable relationships form small inner circles inside about 150 contacts.

Example

Dunbar's estimate from primate brains, 1993

- The human neocortex ratio of 4.1 is about 50% above any other primate's.
- → The primate equation predicts a human group size of 147.8 people.
- → Hunter-gatherer clans average 148 people; Christmas card lists average 153.5 people.

Use it for

- ✓ Asking which close friends lose time when a new job fills your week
- ✓ Splitting a growing club or company into smaller units with clear rules
- ✓ Judging why small communities manage a shared pasture or fishing ground well

Watch out

- ✗ Dunbar's number of 150 is an average group size, not a hard limit on friends.
- ✗ A 2021 reanalysis of the brain data allowed any human group size from 3.8 to 292.

Remember Protect time for your closest few, because close friendships need the most time.