

Why see a therapist when you can just talk to your friends?

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Sometimes people ask me why they should bother seeing a therapist when they can just talk to their friends. Friends know your history, you're comfortable together, and you trust and care for each other. Friends don't expect to get paid, either, and you can meet socially instead of making an office appointment. All that's true and wonderful.

What can a therapist do that a friend can't do? **First of all, therapy is completely private** – so you can speak freely, without fear that your story will go where you'd rather it didn't. Maybe there are things you're afraid of, or that embarrass you or make you feel sad, and you feel a need to talk about them. You can discuss them with friends or family, that's true, but you might like the confidentiality that a therapist provides.

Next, a therapist, me, for example, is trained to see your patterns, both good ones and ones that don't work very well. I can point them out to you, and then together we can enhance the good and avoid the not so good. For example, many people keep having the same kinds of relationship problems over and over, and need to learn to make better choices both in their own behaviors and in finding suitable partners. Others have trouble getting along with people at work, or don't know how to make friends, or feel sad and lonely. Therapy is really good at helping people with relationships, because it is a kind of test relationship – you get to try out new ways of being, but safely, and with feedback.

Friends may not be totally honest with you because they don't want to hurt your feelings. I don't want to hurt your feelings either, but I know how to be straightforward and direct, and how to say things in ways that won't be so painful. And if they are painful, we can slow down and let you go at your own pace to help you feel safe, using techniques that will help you feel less anxious or depressed.

Perhaps you just want advice. Can't a friend tell you what to do, or help you figure things out?

Certainly, a friend may have ideas of what's best for you, and tell you what to do. I may have ideas about what's best too, but more importantly I will help you figure things out for yourself. A therapist can help you look deep inside where your own true answers live – and teach you to remember that pathway to your own truths so you can find it again when you need it. Therapists like to help people learn how to look inside on their own, so when they're finished with therapy they can get on with more rewarding lives.

When you first meet a therapist you have to get to know them and trust them, like with anybody. How do you know you've met the right therapist? Mostly, you can feel it in your gut. Do you like each other? Do you think you could get comfortable with this person?

Yes, it's scary to begin treatment, and awkward talking to a stranger about your personal life. All therapists have ways of helping people feel comfortable; as an Object Relations specialist, I pay close attention to the unspoken feelings revealed in your body language. I'll let our conversation develop naturally, and I'll invite you to ask any questions you might have, especially if they seem silly. I'll probably make a joke, or try to, because therapy can also be playful.

Don't people get too dependent on their therapist? You might feel dependent for a time, but therapists measure their success by people's abilities to learn and move on, leaving therapy with healthier strategies to make better lives for themselves.

Feeling like you're done with treatment? The best thing is to talk it over with your therapist and review your original goals. Have you met them? Are there new goals you'd like to work towards?

If you both agree that it's time to bring your relationship to a close it's smart to set a date for termination, so you can say a full goodbye to each other. Goodbyes are just as important as hellos, you know.