



My Friend, by Helen Thompson Robson

Therapists, Friends, Lovers, and Beyond

Are these boundaries good and helpful? Do you believe them?

“The only way to have a friend is to be one.”
— **Ralph Waldo Emerson**

Lincoln Stoller, PhD, 2022. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons
Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International license (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)
www.mindstrengthbalance.com



I’m concerned about our confusing relationships. It’s seen as a good thing when friends are promoted to lovers or intimates, but a bad thing when it goes in the other direction. Therapists are taught to stay within their boundaries and avoid becoming friends or intimates.

In the end, we’re left with little latitude, few options, and many people who don’t agree. I’m reminded of the common explanation for aircraft accidents. It’s never the rules; it’s always “pilot error.”

Friends

A friend can become a therapist, or a sort of therapist, but for an intimate to become a therapist borders on sick, at least I think so. What are these categories, and why are they so incompatible? Some of our relationship problems reside less in the relationships we make than the categories we put them in. First to define them.

Friends—and I'm talking about deep friendships, not acquaintances, social media followers, or colleagues—share emotional trust and responsibility. Friends expect and demand reciprocation and tolerance. You can impose stress and demand a hearing from your friends, and you're expected to tolerate and even welcome the demands they make of you.

The bonds of friendship grow stronger by your giving or sacrificing for them, while acquaintances typically grow when gifts are received. A substantial sacrifice for a casual friend is inappropriate. Being too forward can damage the relationship, unless it is a token of love. But in that case, it's not friendship that's being offered, it's intimacy.

Most defining of friendship is a shared knowledge of the boundaries. Friends are expected not to exercise disregard, indifference, or emotional harm, and if they do accidentally, they're expected to be remorseful.

Friends know and preserve what's sacred to you. They do not have secret affairs with your parents, partners, or children, though they can with your siblings or cousins. In fact, friends often have affairs with each other's brothers or sisters, but we only accept secrecy when it's protective, not exploitative.

Lovers

“To the world you may be just one person, but to one person you may be the world.”

— Dr. Seuss

A good relationship between lovers is hard to define because most love relationships fail. This is almost a shock to recognize, but it's certainly true. If you define a lovers' relationship as both loving and sexual, then few of such relationships progress to the level of successful, stable, and enduring.

Two unusual things happen when we fully open ourselves to another: we manifest our best and our worst aspects, and we often can't control either. Relationships dominated by the light are not a problem, but we also don't gain an understanding of them. I've found only superficial explanations of successful relationships. Positive spiritual bonds don't lend themselves to analysis.

Similarly, nowhere in my studies, ceremonies, research, or experience have I found an insightful explanation of people's dark sides. I have seen darkness in my lovers, but it was never explained or explored. Even in couples counseling, I have not experienced, taught, or been encouraged to explore another person's dark side. Similar to the light, the dark also does not lend itself to analysis.

Few loving, sexual relationships fall back to deep friendships. I might have seen this in one former couple, but I can't be sure, since the kind of questions I would ask are not socially appropriate. I have not experienced this transition in any of my own lovers. The ashes of burned romantic bridges are not fertile.

I regret the loss of lovers and the loss of deep friendships. It makes me wonder if we really had a deep, foundational friendship to begin with. A deep, personal rejection leaves little option other than a breaking off of relations.

Friendship has a boundary that excludes intimacy. Going from friendship to intimacy is an unmistakable transition. To unilaterally break an intimate connection is a demotion that excludes the trust and reciprocation friendship demands. Breaking intimacy seems to doom a friendship to an acquaintance of sealed secrets.

“Experts on romance say for a happy marriage there has to be more than a passionate love. For a lasting union, they insist, there must be a genuine liking for each other. Which, in my book, is a good definition for friendship.”

— Marilyn Monroe

I know some people who have engineered a shift away from intimacy that preserved a measure of friendship. But even in those situations—when the loss of intimacy is mutually agreed on—what results is a strained family relationship, not a friendship. I’ll talk about family relationships last.

Therapists

We therapists are taught not to become friends, lovers, or intimates. There are obviously good reasons for this, as well as some unconvincing ones. As is typical of teaching—which differs from learning—many therapists who are taught this lesson don’t learn it. I’m against teaching when it comes at the expense of learning, but that’s another story.

The therapy relationship is not reciprocal. Like a doctor, the therapist provides a service and does not ask for service in return. Therapists are expected to give within limits, and be rewarded in a fashion that doesn’t compromise the outcome. Cost is up front, and it’s expected that money is all the therapist requires. Everything else should be optional, even commitment can’t be expected.

The notion of value is key, and cost is just a variable in the equation. As long as you’re getting value, counseling can make progress. If value becomes negative, therapy is counterproductive.

Although it isn’t made clear, the therapeutic relationship does support a level of intimacy, but it’s a clear, guided, and controlled sort of intimacy. I’ve watched many videos of therapists with clients, and the best therapists have a clear sense of leading their clients to more intimate levels of connection and self-exposure.

Masterful therapists are amazing to watch. Virginia Satir was a master of moving to appropriate intimacy, and you can see her in action in this introductory YouTube video titled “Virginia Satir The Essence of Change” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiOG6qsf8BU>).

If you’d like to consider your relationships and what they mean to you. Call me for a discovery call. Book a time on my calendar, and I’ll send you a zoom link.

Intimacy

Sexual intimacy seems to lack guidance and control, and why is this? Must it always, should it? I don’t hear these questions asked, but often wonder about them. Could or should we control sexual intimacy? Would we be better for it? Do we even try?

I think the deep answer is that, for most of us, sexual energy expresses subconscious feelings that are out of our control. These are feelings we don’t understand and lack the skill to guide. Sexuality guides our behavior not because it’s instinctive, but because it carries what’s spiritually necessary. If we have the most to learn from our most difficult relationships—and I think we do—then sexual relationships

take us to the limits of our understanding.

A therapeutic relationship that consensually turns sexual may have a great deal to teach us. It's more reciprocal than the client/therapist relationship, and it upsets that relationship. If both parties want to destroy the therapeutic structures they've built and move into the realm of chaos, then a sexual relationship might be just what they're looking for. It clearly takes both parties outside any contract.

Therapeutic relationships are unbalanced. They're designed to remain stable while fostering change in the client. The therapist may understand the client at the start, but they may not understand them later. A therapeutic relation isn't designed to give the client insight into the therapist's psyche.

In contrast, changing from a therapist to a friend need not be destructive, but it requires more discretion than a deep friendship. A therapeutic friendship is substantially more than just an acquaintance, but it's not as symmetrical as a deep friendship. A therapeutic friendship is like the relationship of a parent to an adult child.

A deep friendship accepts risks, errors, and indiscretions, but the friendship itself is more important than a decision on any topic. That is to say, a deep friendship is planted in a respect and acceptance that reasonable, well-meaning mistakes cannot uproot.

There is a mutually understood line, the crossing of which deep friendships don't allow. A small betrayal threatens a friendship, but spiritual betrayal goes beyond the pale. Spiritual betrayals kill friendships.

A therapeutic friendship requires the therapist uphold therapeutic integrity. Intimate but not sexual sharing, mutual expectations, and shared support extend a therapy relationship to a therapeutic friendship.

A therapist has knowledge and power in fragile areas of their client's psyche. They still have that power if they move into a therapeutic friendship. This one-sided nature of the therapeutic friendship creates a responsibility that will not survive abuse by the therapist. In the event of any deep contest, the former therapist must surrender their greater power.

If this asymmetry is understood, and navigated by both people, then I believe such a therapeutic friendship can be stable, positive, and enduring. This is less constrained and more reciprocal than a therapeutic relationship, but more constrained than a deep friendship. It's a relationship that could become balanced in time.

I'd like all my therapeutic relationships to evolve into therapeutic friendships. I've found this is possible with perhaps one in thirty former clients. With additional sharing, exploration, and exposure, a former client could attain an equal level of knowledge and responsibility in my life. I don't really expect they want to. If they could achieve that, then we might sustain a deep friendship.

Family

"Our most basic instinct is not for survival but for family."

— **Paul Pearsall**, neuropsychologist

Your relationship to your family members is therapeutic. You have certain powers over them that they don't have over you, and the reverse is also true. These powers reside in secrets, neither shared nor acknowledged.

Stress develops over these secrets, and this stress will remain until the secrets are released. It can remain even after the secrets are forgotten. This kind of stress becomes built into the family members and their relationships. When the secrets are lost, the stress becomes even more difficult to remove.

Families create reluctant obligations. It's rare that our family members are friends, and equally rarely are they enemies. We often say that we dislike aspects of family members, but we rarely hate them.

We might be more emphatic in rejecting our family if we could reject family, but the family bond—which we cannot really break even when the law allows—prevents us. It becomes clear why we should avoid hate within families, and that's because hate reflects on us. Family members are part of us; if we hate them, we hate parts of us.

Most families are dysfunctional, and most of us accept this. People come for counseling to fix their future with neither hope nor expectation of fixing their family. People give up on their families and hardly mention them except to justify themselves.

How can people expect to fix themselves when a huge part of themselves is dysfunctional, and they've given up fixing it? It's not possible to fix yourself without fixing your relationship to your family.

It's true that you can't fix your family—your family members have to fix themselves—but you can fix your relationship to them. And you must fix what you can fix if you're to heal yourself. I believe this is a deep truth, and it's one that most people can't accept, and work on only when forced to by their own dysfunction. Even then, people remain reluctant.

Fixing the family requires releasing the secrets, and this is a problem if the secrets have been forgotten. If you have been abused and either cannot or will not remember, then the stress will persist, as will all the coping strategies that surround it, both yours and those of family members.

“The advantage of growing up with siblings is that you become very good at fractions.”

— **Robert Brault**, author

Trauma

Adults traumatized as children often cannot remember their abuse. Crimes committed to us and by us slip into the unopened closets of our foggy past. We actually don't remember much of anything, and we're certainly not inclined to remember the ugly bits.

Coping strategies and emotional residuals remain embedded in our thoughts and behaviors. Until the emotional charge is released, these coping behaviors continue to serve us. They are strategies that have become habits, whitewashed positive memories, and forgotten secrets too painful to touch. Unless the underlying problems are addressed, change is limited to finding other coping strategies.

In most families, the thoughts and behaviors are passed down through the generations. The abuses are repeated both as compulsions and as attempts to regain the memories and repair the damage. Instead of repair, the experiences are often again buried and forgotten, and the patterns persist.

I tell clients who feel they might have been victims of abuse that their memories are an opportunity to fix their lineage. They have the chance to do the work that previous family members failed to do.

They may see themselves as victims, but they are also born into the role of heroes. Whether or not they can succeed will be up to them, but in any case they are playing a heroic role in honoring those who struggled before them. Those who follow will gain incalculable benefits.



Recovery

“They were beautiful shells, as white as the surf in the sea. When you held one up to your ear you could hear the sound of your best friend talking to you, even if she was a thousand miles away.”

– Alice Hoffman

MDMA is a synthetic drug that alters mood and perception. It’s called an entactogen because it engenders feelings of love and warmth. MDMA is being used in therapy as a way of repairing damaged emotions and emotional relationships. Current MDMA-assisted therapy focuses on its use for patients with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (Thai & Lommen, 2018)

I listened to a presentation given by a young woman about how she prevailed in convincing all the members of her family to take MDMA at a family gathering. It was difficult for her to convince her parents to go along with this plan, but she ultimately did. Over the Christmas holidays, three or four siblings joined their parents for a shared, empathogenic, MDMA experience.

She reported such dramatic advances in the sharing of love and the releasing of stress that all the family continued to practice this MDMA-facilitated ceremony at every Christmas gathering thereafter. By the time she presented her experience to my group, her family had joined for this experience three times.

Current research is ongoing on the effect of MDMA in relieving symptoms of individual patients, but there are fewer explorations of its effect on couples or its use in family therapy (Almond, & Allan, 2019; Shannon, Colbert, & Hughes, 2019). MDMA may be facilitating fundamental changes in personality (Wagner et al., 2017).

The nature of family dysfunction is communal. Even if there are family issues that we need to resolve for ourselves, there are family issues we can only resolve together. It may be difficult to imagine dealing with one’s mother to discuss forbidden topics while on psychedelics—I can hardly imagine it

myself—yet that is the opportunity. What better way to achieve the impossible than to do what you cannot imagine?

At some point, we will be doing this. That time may be closer than we think, but it's not going to happen unless you take the lead. MDMA is still illegal, as absurd as that may be, but you can still start wrapping your head around it.

I don't consider this simply an opportunity; it's an obligation. We are obliged to those who have been and will be injured by the secrets and behaviors we have not resolved.

Think about how you might do this. Think about what you might do. I'd be happy to talk to you if you'd like to consider it.

Book a free discovery call now:

Click this link.

<https://www.mindstrengthbalance.com/schedule15>

References

Almond, K., & Allan, R. (2019). Incorporating MDMA as an adjunct in emotionally focused couples therapy with clients impacted by trauma or PTSD. *The Family Journal*, 27 (3), 293–99. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480719852360>

Shannon, S., Colbert, R., & Hughes, S. (2019). Therapeutic and social uses of MDMA, in C. S. Grob, & J. Grigsby (Eds.), *Handbook of Medical Hallucinogens*, Guilford Press (pp. 264-76). Retrieved from: <https://dokumen.pub/qdownload/handbook-of-medical-hallucinogens-1462545440-9781462545445.html>

Thal, S. B., & Lommen, M. J. J. (2018 Jan 6). Current perspective on MDMA-assisted psychotherapy for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, 48: 99–108. Retrieved from: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10879-017-9379-2>

Wagner, M. T., Mithoefer, M. C., Mithoefer, A. T., MacAulay, R. K., Jerome, L., Yazar-Klosinski, B., & Doblin, R. (2017 Jun21). Therapeutic effect of increased openness: Investigating mechanism of action in MDMA-assisted psychotherapy, *Journal of Psychopharmacology*, 31 (8): 967-74. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0269881117711712>