

Building Healthy Connections Newsletter May 2025

Mental Health Awareness Month Feature:



Talking with a Friend vs. Therapy: Key Differences You Should Know

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When we go through difficult times, finding a confidant in a secure and consistent relationship has the ability to provide the reassurance and comfort we need to get through. When thinking of what type of support a person needs, there are many things to consider. With some difficulties, having a friend to call and listen is just what we need. In other times, having a therapist can be uniquely beneficial. When trying to decide which is needed, there can be some confusion. At face value, what's provided in a therapeutic relationship can look a lot like the support found from a close relative or a reliable friend. After all, support is support, right?

Modern Therapy

Over the past few decades, there have been many theoretical advances in modern and effective therapy. Today, patients rarely lay on a Freudian couch to go over their dreams and urges as a robotic clinician quietly listens without expression. Due to research findings and experience in the field of psychotherapy, much emphasis has been given to a more genuine and interactive therapeutic

relationship; one where the therapist is more human, more engaged, and more personable. That being the case, the differences between a conversation with a close friend and one with a therapist can seem blurry.

When Therapy is Needed

Everyone goes through difficult moments, and during those times, friends can be an essential source of support. But what happens when the difficulties repeat themselves and the problems become a little bigger? What happens when a person needs more than just a shoulder to cry on or some advice to help them through?



For some of life's difficulties, it is helpful to find support that goes a little deeper. In life, some stressors have patterns or repetitions that stay consistent across different circumstances. When it is time to dig into our own reactions and our role in the recurring problems we may come across, the advice from a friend can often fall short. Though a friend's validation and comfort is helpful and even needed at times, it may not be enough to elicit a long-lasting change in one's life.

Forgetting the Balancing Act

In any healthy friendship, both individuals are responsible for their respective growth and health. When the support of a friendship becomes too focused on one person, it can become lopsided leaving a person to feel indebted or even guilty. In therapy, the focus is solely on you. There is no need for an exchange of care as you are the only individual who is objectively seeking support.

Freedom can be found in letting one's self go from the unspoken social norm of keeping things even. In therapy, a person is afforded the luxury to dive into the details of their difficulties without fear of being overwhelming, feeling guilty, or uncomfortable. Having another person's complete and consistent attention can therefore become reliable and unwavering, providing room for self-exploration and self-expression that may have not been previously available.



The Comfort of Clinical Attention

Another detail about talking to a therapist that is different from talking to a friend is that of clinical expertise. Though friends often provide fantastic insights and can offer their own experiences to learn from, a therapist's knowledge is grounded in research, education, and clinical awareness. This type of clinical attention allows a therapist to keep a watchful eye on an individual's difficulties as they are aware of what constitutes an unhealthy habit or a faulty coping strategy.

In more intensified circumstances, a therapist can also detect when a disorder is present and what type of treatment should be applied. Knowing that the person you're confiding in has a clinical foundation to draw from can give you the trust and confidence that your care is professional and best-suited for your needs. It can also provide you with the reassurance that an expert is aware of your life's struggles and has a multitude of research-backed methods to draw from which have been found to have effective and long-lasting results.

Ethics and Boundaries

Therapists are bound by the APA code of ethics to ensure that their practices protect those they treat. Much consideration has been taken into account for the many ways a therapeutic relationship can both flow in a natural and genuine direction while holding fast to the ethical guidelines that keep the relationships from getting too messy.



Furthermore, therapists follow guidelines that make certain that professional boundaries are maintained to ensure the emotional safety and confidentiality of clientele. Though some might worry that such boundaries may keep the therapeutic relationship from manifesting a real or authentic connection, research has found the opposite. Clients of therapy often find that when trusting that their therapist will keep an eye on the ethical guidelines of the therapeutic relationship, the client is afforded more freedom for their thoughts and emotions to flow. Subsequently, clients are able to engage in therapy without fear that their expressions will overwhelm their therapist or harm the connection they are building. In many ways, the client is afforded the opportunity to lean in to a close relationship in a way they wouldn't be able to when talking to a friend or family member.

In Summary...

The support of another person can often be the saving grace for an individual going through life's difficulties. It is therefore important to know what type of support is needed. When having a therapist in your corner, one who is consistently reliable and available each week, many complex and emotionally challenging obstacles can be given clarity and relief. Creating a therapeutic space that offers a unique freedom to express without judgement can provide you with a much needed launch pad for self-exploration. Through therapy you can learn to identify your relational patterns, learn more about your emotional reactions, and gain insights into your thoughts in a way that promotes long-lasting change. If you feel that you are in need of such support, individual therapy may be just what the doctor ordered.

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