

One Pitfall of the Therapeutic Process

A RESPONSE TO "A CLOSE CALL" ABOUT THERAPY AND FAMILY RUPTURES

By Shoshana Hoffman



The first telltale clue that your friend “who would never, ever consider therapy for as long as she lives because she doesn’t believe in it one fraction of one percent” is seeing a psychologist is the sudden, dramatic (and if you’re not familiar with therapy, enigmatic) shift in the way she uses language—a major deviation from her usual MO.

If the vernacular of therapy is foreign to you, it’s likely you’ll blink in confusion when she begins to parrot her therapist unconsciously. But if you are a psychologist yourself, or have tried for decades to figure out your life from the vantage point of a therapist’s couch, you may very likely suppress a giggle and/or a knowing grin as your friend suddenly pontificates authoritatively on psychological topics she knew absolutely nothing about two months ago. You think that your sweet friend is *adorable* as an obvious new convert, but oh, so transparent.

Your friend’s sudden use of jargon you

never heard cross her lips before is the first indication that something is afoot. She no longer wants to talk to you—she wants to “process.” Rather than telling you she’s upset with what you did yesterday, she denounces you as “passive-aggressive.” And if your attention wanders during your friend’s account of *that terrible thing that happened last week*, she won’t ask why you’re not paying attention (as she usually does); instead, she will chastise you for “not being present.” And then she’ll probably add, “You know, I just realized you never allow yourself to be in the moment.” If you’ve ever practiced, or been the recipient of, therapy, then you know with certainty that your friend is in the thrall of an influential therapist and is (unconsciously) aping his or her every word.

This is not necessarily bad; it’s actually phase one. Mimicry is probably the first essential step in the learning process (after all, we do learn by imitation), a long evolution for your friend, who may benefit immensely from her interaction

with the professional—benefits that will hopefully expand her mind and generate long-term, positive outcomes. Integrating a psychologist’s lingo is common, expected and normal. It reflects the fact that the client is open and receptive to what the therapist is saying (there are many different modalities in therapy, and often the therapist is *not* interventive at all, sometimes just mirroring the client’s words or, in psychoanalysis, for example, saying little). This receptivity augurs well for your friend’s potential for growth, and that, of course, is a very good thing.

But here’s the rub. If a small percentage of cases, the psychologist may not be highly qualified, or has his or her own personal agenda that dominates “the room.” It is consequently crucial to “vet” your therapist exhaustively, research his or her credentials, and see someone who comes highly recommended by a source you trust. Therapy can prove to be an invaluable, long-lasting, life-changing or even lifesaving experience, but if you happen to fall into the hands of an

incompetent practitioner, it can prove destructive to your friends, your family, and most importantly, yourself.

Using psychological lingo is the first sign your friend is under the influence. This is adorable and obviously not problematic in the context of human relations. But in some cases, the trajectory may spiral down from there. Because the second anticipated step in your friend's "development"—an equally transparent signal to cognoscenti that she's currently in therapy—is her predictable but completely abrupt use of an unfamiliar word you've never associated with this woman before. And that emblematic word is "no."

Atypical for the loving, generous person you've always known her to be, the constant litany of "nos" falling from her mouth is at singular odds with her history of being the *chesedika*, go-to girl for requests, favors, and errands.

Before her calendar became pockmarked with therapist's appointments, your friend could be counted on for practically any kind of assistance, ministrations or support. But suddenly she's saying no at a relatively rapid clip. At first, her nos are tremulous—as if she's uncertain of implementing this newfound approach to navigating life that her therapist has urged her to incorporate. Then, with the passage of time, her rejection of requests she never questioned before becomes firmer and more entrenched, increasingly easier with repetition.

She is an eager acolyte, a vessel for the therapist's enlightening message: "You come first. You have to take care of yourself before you can take care of anyone else. If you spend all your time and energy on other people, where will you be? If you don't take care of yourself, who will?"

If this principle could be practiced with

moderation, maturity and wisdom, it would not be the underlying factor promoting divorces, family alienation, and ruptured friendships. But sometimes people take these instructions to a radical extreme, emerging from their overzealous commitment to these caveats...virtual paragons of selfishness.

When people become dedicated solely to the service of their own selves, blithely shedding their dedication and commit-

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ment to others, it can wreak havoc that is potentially irrevocable. This, I believe, is the single most dangerous outcome that therapy with an incompetent individual can beget: the notion that "I come first," no matter what the consequences are for all the people who come second.

Yes, we must practice self-care and be

good to ourselves. And perhaps there are times when we give in excess and are unfairly taken advantage of. But the reverberations of "me first" mentoring emanating from a therapist's chambers can be apocalyptic.

A friend of a friend of mine told me about her own collision with this worldview. "My friend 'Susan' had started working with a new therapist who told her to avoid anyone and anything that might prove to be a source of depression. She was very vulnerable and needed to protect herself at all costs. If she couldn't handle depressing situations, she shouldn't.

"One night, Susan's friend's husband called her in desperation. He was at the hospital, where his wife's father had just died after a short illness. He had to wait for the *chevrah kaddisha*, and he didn't want to tell his wife over the phone. Could Susan—who lived right next door—go over to his house, break the news to his wife, and stay with her until he got back?

"Susan started mumbling something about this being too difficult, but the husband was sure she would do it, considering the circumstances. An hour later, he called his wife and said gently, 'Tatty died very peacefully, a smile on his lips.'

"What? What are you saying?" his wife shrieked. "What are you talking about? No, no, no! It can't be!" And then he heard his wife throw up.

"Susan never went over. She 'just couldn't do it,' she said later. She was not able to handle it. The husband had been 'unfair to ask.'"

Susan was one of the *aveil's* closest friends.

Would her therapist have been proud? ●