



# THE RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

A DISCUSSION WITH KELSEY GRIMM, RCC, ON THE UNWRITTEN RULES OF ADULT FRIENDSHIP AND HOW SHE HELPS HER CLIENTS MANAGE THE TOUGH STUFF

**K**elsey Grimm, RCC, founded her practice, Healing Spaces, five years ago, and it has blossomed into a team of counsellors offering trauma-informed, non-pathologizing, heart-centred therapy in both in-person and virtual sessions.

“We specialize in supporting individuals, adults, kiddos, and couples overcome that which is blocking them from living their ideal lives,” she says.

Often, the relationships people have with their friends become part of that block.


“Sadly, we see clients struggling in their friendships daily,” says Grimm. “Whether clients are confused by having a

friend ‘break up’ with them, feel their friends don’t get them, feel they have to wear an invisible mask when they are around their friends, or somehow don’t feel they have any trusted friends in their lives. Clients struggle in friend relationships.”

And let’s be honest, friendships can be confusing.

“Navigating friendships has never been more complicated than in the last few years of negotiating safety, how to have a ‘distanced’ friendship, all the while not being able to do the things we usually do with our friends,” she says. “Now, we have opened up the vaccinated/unvaccinated complexities, and more than ever, we see our clients struggling in their friendships.”



A photograph of two men sitting on a wooden bench. The man on the left is wearing a light blue button-down shirt and light-colored trousers, looking down at his hands which are clasped in his lap. The man on the right is wearing a dark beanie, a beard, a denim shirt, and jeans, looking towards the first man. They appear to be in a casual, indoor setting with a wooden railing and a plant visible in the background.

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### WHY FRIENDSHIPS CAN BE SO HARD AND CONFUSING

When friendships are good, they are beautiful for so many reasons. We may say our friend is “like a sister” or “like family.” We may say our mom is “our best friend” or we “married our best friend.” But when things go wrong in a friendship, part of the problem is that friendships are different than family relationships — a horse of a different colour, says Grimm.

“Each family seems to have a foundation of expectations and values unspoken and woven into their interactions,” she says. “That doesn’t mean that families aren’t without confusion and conflict but oftentimes, familial relationships come with different complexities. If we reflect on Bowinian theory for a moment — family systems theory and intergenerational trauma — we can see the challenges that can arise. If I were to extend a thread between friendship difficulties and familial difficulties,

it would be that we are all human, bumping up against other humans and there are bound to be challenges. That said, no family is the same and we can’t know the reality of someone’s relationship with a family member just because they are connected by name.”

In families, the determination to reach a compromise, repair damage, or come to terms with a relationship is encouraged and even necessary for well-being. The value of taking these steps is widely accepted and supported. But when a friend relationship goes sideways, it’s treated differently even though it can be just as painful.

“The blurry lines and ‘rules of engagement’ of adult friendships can be very complicated,” says Grimm. “We don’t have any guidelines on how to manage difficulties that might arise, what to do if we want a friendship to change, or what to do if a friend suddenly changes their behaviour.”

Contrast adult friendships with intimate partner relationships.

“While every intimate partner relationship is different, societally and collectively, we have a sense of the behaviours that are mostly acceptable and mostly unacceptable,” she says. “If we are in a generally healthy, loving intimate relationship, we have a loose set of guidelines. We also generally know we have the ability to talk about difficulties when they arise, even though this is not always easy to do.”

Society hasn’t outlined such a template, even loosely, for acceptable behaviour within friendships or even how to have difficult conversations.

The wide-reaching definition of the term “friend” undoubtedly amplifies the confusion. A friend can describe a colleague you share coffee with, a parent on your child’s soccer team, someone you have known since childhood but haven’t seen in over a decade, the person you call when something wild happens in your day, or anything in between.

“Because the word ‘friend’ covers

such a wide range of relationships, it makes it challenging to talk about changes that take place as the friendship develops,” says Grimm. “Typically, when we are dating someone and considering if the relationship is becoming more serious, we have ‘the talk.’ You know the one, where we acknowledge that we actually like each other and want to talk about being ‘exclusive.’ We don’t do this in friendships. In friendships, we ebb into a certain type of relationship without any conversation. We flow into a rhythm and a pattern with a friend, and casually, the relationship unfolds and the edges become more defined. We anticipate when we will see our friend next and what we might do together. We have fun remembering the good times we shared. We look forward to the future gatherings and creating more memories.”

In the same way, a friendship can shift from being emotionally close to distant without acknowledgement of this change.

“We tend to accept a friendship’s ebb and flow through life, and a conversation or consent isn’t required for a friendship to change,” says Grimm. “If we no longer want to have first coffee with the same person or choose to stand beside a different parent at the soccer game or have a big life moment without telling our ‘bestie,’ we make these changes freely.”

While the reason for the change may be completely valid, we may neglect an unwritten expectation from our friend that we will continue to act as we have before.

“While past does not always predict future, there is a certain level of expectation and predictability created from the way we interact with our

friends,” she says, offering an example: “For X amount of time, our best friend Taylor shared big news with us. Suddenly, we hear through the grapevine that Taylor got a new job, and we wonder why they didn’t call us to let us know. We might wonder what we did wrong. We might reflect upon past conversations, the way a joke we made landed a bit flat. We might look for a pattern of change, searching for clues to understand this unexpected behaviour. We might wonder about the last time we saw each other in a meaningful way, and whether they seemed engaged in the conversation or if they were a bit distant or dismissive.”

That wondering, unaddressed, can lead to confusion and hurt.

“I very much believe in freedom of choice and that friendships have a ‘season or a reason,’” says Grimm. “However, when our close friend does not call to share their big news — when they usually call us — it can cause a lot of confusion. We awkwardly move through our feelings trying to understand the changes in behaviour of a friend or former friend on our own. We wonder what we should say when we call them — or even if we should call or text them. We piece together the information we have and may create a self-deprecating story. Often there are hurt feelings, misunderstandings, and confusion.”

What started as a misunderstanding may lead to the end of a friendship, an experience that can be more

significant than the end of an intimate relationships — something Grimm recently discussed with a close friend.

“Both my friend and I have experienced greater heartache in friendships ending compared to intimate partner relationships ending,” she says, adding that the heartache may be connected to our attachment to the other person or



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to the relationship. “With intimate partner relationships, we have a clearer understanding of ‘in’ or ‘out’ and even when ‘it’s complicated,’ we can at least relax into the fact that we know ‘it’s complicated.’”

Friendships can have many more moving pieces in terms of attachment and expectations, she adds, many of which are unspoken, as well as other complexities.

“These might include how we interpret the loss of friendship, whether



we have struggled in friendships before, if we struggle with self-esteem and confidence in friendships, and if we interpret the loss of friendship as a result of something we perceive to be inherently ‘wrong’ with us,” says Grimm. “Even though we know friendships can change, we are confused when we see it starting to happen in *our* friendship with *our* close friend. We are hurt and unsettled, and we don’t know what to do. The bottom line is we miss our friend and want them back.”

### WHEN FRIENDSHIPS HIT A ROUGH PATCH

When her clients talk about friendships that have become difficult, Grimm presents a few options:

- 1) They can have a conversation with their friend that results in positive change.
- 2) They can decide not to talk about it and try move through it on their own.
- 3) They can pretend as if everything is okay and try to tolerate the behaviour.
- 4) They can decide the friendship is over.

Some people say they don’t want friendships that are too much “work” and choose the easiest option to avoid having a conversation that may be difficult but may result in a positive change.

“Instead, we allow and excuse behaviour that doesn’t feel okay to us. We ghost our friends if we feel they are too much work or there are conflicts we don’t want to deal with. We lose friends instead of being willing to ride through the tough stuff together and have long-lasting relationships,” says Grimm.

How do we talk about the tough

stuff in a friendship? Grimm offers these guidelines:

#### ■ **Step one:** Ask permission to speak.

“This can be helpful because it prepares the other person to know you want to talk about something important. If they give you permission, it ensures they are willing to engage in a meaningful conversation.”

#### ■ **Step two:** Find a neutral, agreed-upon location and time to meet.

“This can be helpful because if we are in a space that is comfortable only to us, they may feel attacked and less secure. If we are in their space, we might feel less comfortable. If both parties agree to the location, we have a more even playing field with less power dynamics at play. It may sound subtle, but it can be important.”

#### ■ **Step three:** State the difficulty using ‘I’ language, ensure space for them to share, practise good listening skills, and mutually agree upon a resolution forward.

“We want to be mindful whenever we bring up conflict with another that the other person might feel attacked and go on the defense. We can do our best to mitigate a defensive response if we are gentle, mindful of our language. We also want to ensure equal space to hear their side as well. Going in with curiosity instead of stating facts can also be helpful. Using language such as ‘I am confused’ or ‘Help me understand’ can be great openers.”

#### ■ **Step four:** Ensure a check-in about the conversation after an appropriate time.

“A conversation like this might need some space to breathe. After having the conversation, you and your friend might have other thoughts and feelings that arise. Ensuring we circle back to the hard conversation means we truly

care about the friendship, the other person, and we want to move forward together in a mutually agreeable way.”

#### ■ **Step five:** Revisit the previously agreed-upon resolution again if necessary.

“If a new foundation has been agreed upon and it is breached for whatever reason or behaviours start slipping, we can gently remind our friend about the previous conversation and what was agreed to or discussed.”

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### SETTING BOUNDARIES IN FRIENDSHIPS

Sometimes, the client wants to make the changes in a friendship.

“When we have friendships where we are honoured, respected, supported, and in alignment with the other person in terms of what the friendship is, we might have a keeper on our hands,” she says. “But when we consider the many people we have in our lives, we might start to prune the people we spend time with if we feel more drained and hurt than filled up by our interactions

with them. Oftentimes, we have a hunch something isn't working for us in a friendship, but we talk ourselves out of any action by either making concessions for our friend's behaviour or creating reasons not to have a conversation with them."

This may mean boundaries are needed, and Grimm lists signs:

- 1) Thinking about this friend creates tension in your body.
- 2) You wouldn't tolerate that behaviour from anyone else in your life.
- 3) You feel like your friend is "taking" something from you, either material or energy.
- 4) Seeing a text from this friend causes tension in your body.
- 5) You justify or apologize for their behaviour to others or to yourself.

Setting boundaries with friends may also require having a tough conversation.

"Sometimes the friend has no idea they are doing something that isn't working for the relationship and, in bringing it up, you are inherently shifting the way they understand the friendship," says Grimm.

She encourages clients wanting to set boundaries to start by practising differently.

"By that I mean, the next time the friend crosses a boundary, talk to them in real time about that specific boundary cross. It can be more impactful if we bring to another's attention how their behaviour impacts us as it is happening in real time," says Grimm. "It makes it real, and it doesn't give us the chance to unleash five years of upset at once. Instead, we move slowly and change the behaviour of another by changing our own behaviour."



**While ending a friendship is difficult and painful, Grimm reminds us that it is the quality of our friendships that is important, not the number of friendships.**

It isn't easy to do this.

"It is like you and your friend have done the tango together for your entire friendship and now, mid-dance, you are trying to get them to do the salsa," says Grimm. "It might take some time to adjust, and it might be a bit awkward at first, but stick with it and hopefully, you will be in step together in the salsa over time."

Sometimes, a client may decide to end a friendship. Whether there is a right way to do it may depend on the reasons for ending it.

"There might be a way that feels easier, safer, or appropriate," says Grimm. "Additionally, depending on the type of friendship, if the friendship seems to fizzle naturally, a big conversation might not make sense."

All that said, Grimm encourages clients to treat others with dignity and respect.

"Whether they let a friendship fizzle, choose to have an honest

conversation, or something in between, I encourage them to consider how they would want to be treated in this specific situation with this specific person and see if they can enact a similar approach."

While ending a friendship is difficult and painful, Grimm reminds us that it is the quality of our friendships that is important, not the number of friendships. And having friendships where we treat others as we want to be treated — with respect and kindness — and get the same back is foundational to our well-being and to living our best lives.

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*Kelsey Grimm, RCC, is the founder of Healing Spaces, a collaborative practice, and Kelsey the Counsellor, which offers virtual courses, education, and information to clients as an adjunct to counselling. She is passionate about supporting people to overcome that which prevents us from living our best life.*