

Should Friends Offer Honesty or Unconditional Support?

A “culture of passivity” makes many people reluctant to question their friends’ decisions.

By Stephanie H. Murray – The Atlantic

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Lindsey Konchar has known her best friend, Caroline, since Caroline was born. Their mothers have been best friends since the seventh grade, so even though Konchar is two years older than Caroline, and the two attended different schools in their hometown of Eden Prairie, Minnesota, there was no escaping each other. “We were quite literally forced to be friends,” Konchar told me. But even after they moved out of their mothers’ homes, the friendship continued.

Konchar stayed in Minnesota for college, while Caroline attended school in Boston and then moved to New York City, where she started dating someone. (Caroline is being identified by a pseudonym to protect her privacy.) At first, the new relationship seemed marvelous, “all butterflies and roses,” Konchar recalled. But over time, Caroline’s updates on the relationship grew less cheerful, and more vague. To Konchar, a social worker, something seemed off, and a visit to NYC only solidified her concerns that Caroline’s partner wasn’t treating her well. “She wasn’t her happy-go-lucky self,” Konchar recalled. On the final day of her visit, Konchar decided to express her concerns about the relationship. She chose her words carefully, making sure to cite specific examples, use “I” statements, and clarify that she was speaking up only because she was worried about her friend’s safety. But Konchar could tell that Caroline wasn’t having it. “Her walls went up,” Konchar told me. “We didn’t talk for a long time.”

The dilemma that Konchar faced—whether to say something or bite her tongue—gets at a long-running debate about what it means to be a good friend. Is it appropriate to tell a friend when you think they’re making a bad decision? Or is a friend’s role to offer steadfast and unconditional support, and leave the unsolicited advice to parents, spouses, or siblings? Those parties may feel more entitled or obligated to speak up, because their relationships are better defined and more formalized. But it’s difficult to speak about authority or obligation in friendship, which is to some extent defined by what it’s not: Friends are those who choose to be in one another’s lives although they don’t fulfill a specific role. Even between close friends, it can be tricky to pin down exactly what, if anything, two people owe each other.

By one view, like that of the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, the willingness to be “scrupulously truthful” in such moments is the core of friendship. All humans have blind spots; none of us is immune to poor decision making. A true friend, by MacIntyre’s account, is one who cares enough about our welfare to help liberate us from those illusions. “Friendships survive and flourish only if each friend can rely on the other’s truthfulness,” he once said. Another view, by contrast, holds that it is precisely our willingness to keep our mouth shut in the face of a friend’s error that allows any of our friendships to survive. “Almost always, such human relationships rest on the fact that a certain few things are never said, indeed that they are never touched upon; and once these pebbles are set rolling, the friendship follows after, and falls apart,” Friedrich Nietzsche wrote.

Social-psychology research underscores the tension between these perspectives. Honesty is something people both expect and appreciate from close friends. Asked what makes for intimacy in a friendship, people say things like “If I’m making a mistake, my friend will let me know” or “If I need advice, my friend will give it,” according to a study conducted by Beverley Fehr, a psychology professor at the

University of Winnipeg. But truthfulness isn't all that people expect from their friends, and it doesn't always square with friendship's other duties. The subjects of Fehr's study also emphasized the importance of statements like "No matter who I am or what I do, my friend will accept me." People want honesty from their friends, but also unconditional support and validation. "We have strong expectations for friendships, but that doesn't mean they can't conflict with one another," Fehr told me.

And however important people proclaim honesty to be, research suggests that most of us are very reluctant to confront our friends when issues arise. In another study, Fehr and her fellow social psychologist Cheryl Harasymchuk asked participants how they would handle a variety of problems in romantic relationships. "Regardless of the issue, people say, with a romantic partner, you should discuss it, not just let it be," Fehr said. When asked to consider similar problems in the context of friendship, however, respondents opted for more subdued approaches. These generally fell into one of two camps: loyalty, which involves waiting out the issue and hoping it improves on its own, or what the researchers called neglect. "You just sort of pull away from the situation and let the relationship die a slow death," Fehr told me. Asked what would happen if a friend addressed a problem in a more direct way, respondents weren't as confident that it would do much good. It may be true, as MacIntyre insists, that doing right by our friends sometimes means telling them things they don't want to hear, but Nietzsche is right that most friends won't.

The prevailing "culture of passivity," as Harasymchuk called it, that characterizes most friendships makes some sense. Friendship is a voluntary relationship, unbound by blood or law, which makes it easier to dissolve. In fact, because friendship involves no formal agreement, it's not even necessary to declare the relationship over—you can just subtly back away from it or allow it to "wither on the vine," as Fehr put it. Friendships aren't monogamous, Harasymchuk pointed out, so in the event that you aren't getting what you want from one friend, it's easy enough to turn to another. Generally, and perhaps foolishly, people regard friendship as somewhat expendable, unworthy of the hassle of a confrontation. And the fact is, Fehr noted, a lot of friendships seem to be able to survive just fine despite their tendency toward passivity. As far as the preservation of the relationship is concerned, the risks of calling a friend out are high; the risks of keeping quiet are low.

When Leah Goldman, a certified professional life coach from Massachusetts, ended a long-term relationship after discovering that her partner had been cheating on her the entire time, she was baffled by how many of her friends admitted to having reservations about her ex. From her perspective, she'd offered plenty of opportunities to raise such concerns—she had often brought up her own apprehensions about the relationship—but, with a lone exception, no one had done so. When she asked her friends why they had never spoken up, she says most of them told her they just didn't feel like it was their place to do so. The friend who did speak up lived across the country and had never actually met her partner. But after Goldman shared some of her reservations, the friend said Goldman's partner didn't sound like a great guy, and that she should probably end it. The conversation left Goldman feeling more conflicted than upset. Goldman thinks the experience has made her more likely to tell someone if she were to have reservations about their partner, but she harbors no ill feelings toward those of her friends who didn't. "I can understand their point of view," Goldman told me. "At the end of the day, they were there for me after the breakup, and that's all that mattered to me."

Of course, not all friends are so passive. And some manage to survive even bitter confrontations. Long-standing friendships like Konchar and Caroline's have an advantage in this regard. A strong foundation of mutual trust makes it easier for friends to speak plainly with one another—and trust takes time to build. Fehr explains this in terms of something she calls the “idiosyncrasy credits.” At the start of any relationship, people tend to conform to societal norms. “Basically, we want to show that we're pretty normal,” Fehr said. “So we behave in pretty routine ways.” But as the relationship strengthens, we earn the ability to deviate from such norms. If we've built up enough credit with a friend, we might feel more comfortable spending it by telling them that there's something off about the way their partner talks to them or that we're concerned by how much they're drinking, or by confronting them about any difficult topic.

And while telling a friend something they don't want to hear may indeed cause your relationship with them to suffer, it's possible that your friend will come to appreciate your honesty down the line. After about six months of silence following her trip to New York, Konchar got a call from Caroline. She had broken up with her boyfriend, and admitted that, although she wasn't ready to hear it at the time, Konchar had been right about him. When I asked how the incident had affected their relationship in the long run, Konchar said that the conflict had been strangely good for them; it drove a wedge between them initially, but ultimately deepened and solidified their bond. There is something of a paradox at play here: Difficult honesty is a privilege of very close friendships, but it is also part of what draws two friends close.

From a practical perspective, it's hard to make the case for committing to unflinching honesty as MacIntyre says good friends ought to. Nietzsche was correct, in some sense, when he said that withholding our true thoughts from our friends can help preserve our relationships with them. Because friendship comes with no guarantees. It is a gift; nothing is owed, exactly, only offered. To extend honesty, or anything else, to a friend is to run the risk of its rejection. But if it's friendship of the closest sort that you are after, it's a risk you'll have to take.

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