



270: How to Listen When A Friend Asks For Advice

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to the Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 270.

This is a podcast about making decisions, but also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or if you just need a few minutes away from the constant stream of information and the sometimes delightful, but also distracting hum of entertainment, you're in the right place for discerning your next right thing. Today's question, what role do our friendships play in your decision making lives? More specifically, how can we be friends people trust to come to when they have a decision to make? Are there any tips or tricks on how not to be an annoying friend when someone comes to us for advice? Well, there are, my friend. I hope you'll listen in.

In the summer after my high school graduation, I remember a conversation with my dad about decision making and friendship. We lived in Detroit at the time, and I would be moving away 12 hours from home to attend school at a small college in South Carolina. Likely in preparation for the distance, dad told me this about seeking advice. He said, "When it comes to looking for counsel or next steps, my best bet for help would be prayer," so God, obviously, "scripture, my parents, of course, and maybe a mentor or a professor. But your friends," he said, "may sometimes be helpful, but they're going to be further down the list when it comes to people who will be able to offer wise advice or counsel." Well, now that I've sent two off to college, I can't imagine what it was like for my parents to send me so far away, but I laugh now because I took his advice so seriously like it was this novel information.

I might have even written it down, but now that my kids are the age I was, I think, of course my friends weren't going to be the main source of solid advice. They were 18 like me, we were babies. Well, now that we're grownups, I'd say not only are our friends a great source of counsel and advice, but for many, our friends are our main source of counsel. The role your friends play in your life, of course, depends on your life stage or what's going on in your life at a particular time. Friendship might look different if you're single versus if you're in a relationship, even more different if that relationship is either new or newly ending. If you just moved to a new neighborhood, became a parent or an empty nester or if you've experienced some kind of loss. All of these things impact our friendships and who we go to in times of trouble, concern, grief, worry, et cetera.

Things like promotions, milestones, betrayals, alliances, all of these life situations influence how often or for what reasons we might turn to our friends. Last week I asked on Instagram, which is where I often go to start or continue some of these conversations. But I asked which life decisions are you more likely to turn to your friends for? Overwhelmingly, the people who responded answered one of these three top reasons. I mean, people said a lot of things, but these three came up the most. Number one was job or career advice. If you're thinking about taking a job or leaving a job or things happening within your job, that one was the most often repeated answer. Second was parenting, and that was anything from little tiny

babies or kids schooling, all the way up to turning to our friends to seek advice on parenting older kids. So parenting was a big one.

And then the third common thing that was mentioned was in romantic relationships, maybe specifically if they're kind of new or just starting. Of course there were other reasons that people mentioned. Some of them made me laugh out loud, and I'll just tell you the next common three that were listed the most.

This is very scientific, y'all, by the way. I made tally marks on my notebook as I was reading through the answers, but the next three reasons we turn to our friends that were mentioned, I'll just say them here because they're fun, is for fashion advice, marriage advice, and advice for vacation planning. I thought that was interesting, it came up several times. Well, a few other responses I got, we turned to our friends just to have someone to verbally process with. Someone else said, "Honestly, I only ask my friends for advice when I know in my heart I don't already know the answer, but most of the times I do." Thought that was interesting.

Someone else said, "This question made me realize I rarely turn to friends for decision help. Maybe my closest friends only." And I think that's probably true for a lot of us. We sort of answered this question with the assumption that we're talking about probably some of our closer friends that we might go to.

But another reader acknowledged that sharing is hard and they always dread the vulnerability hangover that often follows, even talking about friendship is a vulnerable subject, I think. Sometimes we go to our friends and we want them to tell us what to do, but mostly we want our friends to help us discern what we actually want to do or what we think is the next right thing. After all, if I go to a friend for advice and what they say is completely opposite of what I want or think, I'm probably not going to take it.

And so I wanted to offer just a simple resource for us, something that could reduce the likelihood that our friends will have a vulnerability hangover after they talk to us. It's something to put in our back pocket for when our friends come to us for advice or feedback. How can we be better listeners for them? Are there some helpful tips or questions that we can always ask when someone comes to us? Well, of course I have ideas. I'll share them in three parts with a few things to remember, a few things to avoid and a few solid questions that could be helpful to ask if your friends come to you for advice.

First, remember, wanting to be heard is not unique to just some people. Everybody wants to be heard, but not everyone's a verbal processor, so depending on your friend's personality, they might need something different from you. If they're a verbal processor, they may not actually be looking for advice, they just need someone to witness hearing them talk. Now, if they are an internal processor and come to you, they might need the same thing. They need someone to witness hearing them talk, but they don't know where to start, so you are there to help get them started, to ask a question or maybe just a couple of questions to help them get that conversation going. Everyone wants to be heard. Being heard is a need for all, but it just might show up differently. What is often true is that we need to hear ourselves and a good listening friend can help us do that. Remember, don't just ask the questions, listen to the answers. Maybe you've been in a conversation with someone where it seems like they just left a seminar on how to be a good listener and the speaker's first point in the seminar was ask questions, and then the person bailed on the workshop.

They just left, they peaced out. And they didn't stick around long enough for the part where you're supposed to actually listen for the answer so they didn't learn how to do that. And they don't know how to do anything except for ask question after question after question. And they don't know how to allow you to think and to have a little bit of white space in the conversation. I think we've probably all been in conversations like that, someone who might be a great question asker, but they don't stick around to hear the answers. In this case, if you are a person who tends to ask question after question, but you're not really great at knowing what to say when they give you the answer, ask a follow-up question based on what they said, not just what you want to know next. Listening and asking questions is often more art than science. And finally, remember talking isn't listening. We've all been in situations where we really need to talk

about something and our friend might even ask a question of us, but then they use our answer as a jumping off point to tell a long story about their own experience that was the same. And sometimes we need that, but oftentimes if the setting of the conversation is, “Hey, I’m coming to you for some advice, or I need to talk this through about parenting, or I have this thing about my job going on.” And if the only feedback I get from my friend is a bunch of stuff about their own job or about their own parenting, I’m going to walk away from that conversation maybe needing someone else to listen to me. And so we can be the kind of friend who, if someone comes to us and has a thing that they want to talk about, then we can ask the first question, we can ask the second question, we can give space for them to continue to work that out, and it’s not that we can’t share something of our own experience, but I think just an awareness that keeping that sort of limited and always kind of bringing it back to the friend and maybe asking a question after we say all our words. I think that can be so helpful and can go a really long way in conversations like this.

Next, I just have two things to avoid. I’m sure there are many, many, many things we can avoid, but two especially come to mind. One is saying something like, “You shouldn’t feel that way or you ought to feel this way.” And oftentimes we say, “You shouldn’t feel that way or don’t feel like that.” Because we’re trying to help the person realize that there’s a different way to be or that that’s not what someone meant or that they might be feeling shame and we see that and we want to pull them out of it so badly and we love them and it’s often said from a place of love. But you know anytime we say the word should or shouldn’t, it often can have a shaming effect on the listener. And kind of holding hands with that, another thing to avoid is asking the question, why would you blank that? Why would you do that? Why would you think that? Why would you say that? In fact, I would say, if you can, avoid the why question altogether, or at least try not to ask it too early because it can feel accusatory. It’s not how you mean it, and maybe a lot of times we don’t hear it that way, but especially early in the conversation, the question why can often cause a person to freeze up because they think like, “Well, I don’t know why and that’s why I’m here, and I’m not sure why I feel this way. I just know that I do.” And so giving someone space to walk it all the way out can be helpful before asking a why question. “Well, Emily, what questions could we ask?” Here’s a few and this could be helpful or not, so take it or leave it.

But I would say the first question that I think is often helpful to ask when someone comes to me, again, remember the context, someone has come to me as a friend, a friend of mine, and they are seeking advice or counsel or they have something they want to talk about. I think what can be helpful is to actually ask my friend, what would be most helpful for you in this conversation? Do you want me to say words or do you just need to say words? With a few of my closest friends, we have a shorthand and we’ll say, do you need a place to say words or do you want feedback? And in fact, we don’t even always have to ask that question now because we have learned to preface the conversation when we are the person seeking advice with, “Hey, do you have a minute? I just need to say the words.”

Or we’ll say, “I’m going to say some words and then I really need you to tell me what you think or talk me off the ledge.” These are some things that I have said to my actual real friends to give them a guideline, to help them out. To know what it is I’m looking for. Because y’all, sometimes I might think I want advice, but really I don’t and sometimes I realize that too late and we can talk that out. But a lot of times I know what I’m going to do or I know what I want to do, but I just got to talk this through. And I’ll tell my friend, “Hey, I’m going to say some words and would you hear me say them and tell me what you’re hearing?” And that’s such a gift to our friends to kind of know what we need going in and that comes with time. And I think that just prefacing your conversation with the kind of feedback you’re looking for is such a gift to our friends, and it’s also a bolster to your friendships.

Another question to ask when you might not know what to say or when you don’t really have a question that comes to mind is simply saying, would you say more words about that or tell me more? I think almost always when we’re in a comfortable relationship with a friend, the person probably has more words they could say, or maybe there’s something that they’re holding back. And so you, as the friend, giving them

permission to say a little bit more does a couple of things. One, it might get beneath the surface and it might get to the real issue. And two, it lets them know that they're not being a burden to you, that you actually want to know. I can't tell you the number of times that someone has asked me this question or in the middle of a conversation or even at the beginning they asked me a thing and I realize my default is I assume people don't want to know. I assume that people are busy and they've got a lot going on, and I need to take up the smallest amount of space in this conversation as possible so as not to be a burden. I mean, now I'm not saying this is always how I act, but that's my default. And so I have to work to move towards someone to either seek advice or to say my words or all the things. And I assume people don't want to know, and I think a lot of us might be that way. And so when you, as the friend, say something simple like, "Say more words about that," or "Tell me more." It's such a gift because it gives them a sign. It's like a green light. It's like waving a flag, "Come this way. I'd like to see you more. I'd like to know more." And it can be a statement of love and belonging.

Another question you could ask is, what's the worst and best thing that could happen? And it depends on the situation. It depends on the decision they're trying to make, but this is a quicker way to a pro/con conversation because it gets to the heart of the fear and the desire. What is the best thing that could happen, that's kind of getting to what they really want and hope for. And what is the worst thing that could happen, that kind of opens up the door to what they're most afraid of.

And then finally, a very simple question you can ask in these kinds of conversations is just, what's your next right thing? And I think that this question can come off one of two ways. It could come off sounding, "Well, what's your next right thing?" Like there's one thing you should be doing, and what do you think it is like it's a secret. And we know hopefully if you've been around a while, that's not the spirit of the question. But I think encouraging our friends to not necessarily always think of a decision or a situation they're in as we have to decide at all at once or solve the whole thing and just helping our friends remember, "Maybe you just need to go to bed." Or maybe there's just one email you have to send. That's it. You don't have to do the whole thing, just send one email or ask one question. And so helping them asking what the next right thing is, and maybe it's not worded exactly that way, can also be a really friendly reminder that, hey, first of all, you're not alone because we're having this conversation. And also you can take it a step at a time and then we can talk again and you can tell me what step you took and we are in this together and you're not alone in it." That's really the gift of friendship and sometimes that question, so what's just your one next right thing? And talking that out can be such a gift to someone, to help them verbally process that.

Remember, as friends, we aren't each other's therapists or spiritual directors, so we can just be friends together. We don't have to be overly careful all the time. That's the gift of friendship. And of course, if they're asking us point-blank about design or fashion or books or vacation ideas, those conversations are going to be direct and casual and back and forth natural normal. Here we are. That's what those are. But when someone comes to you as a trusted friend and they're working through a decision about their job or career, about their kids or their parenting, about their romantic relationships, these things can feel high stakes, because they are.

And I think we would do well to treat those conversations with a lot of kindness and grace. Let's assume it was difficult for them to even bring it up. And we want to provide space that's free of shame or blame for our friends and be a safe place for them to be human people. Hopefully, our friends show us what we can't see on our own. While we are often the experts at highlighting our own weaknesses, shortcomings, our own inabilities. Our friends often reflect back beauty. They remind us who we really are. They remind us we don't have to do this alone. They're the eyes outside our bodies. I'm learning to trust what they see. Friends may not always provide us the security we long for. Sometimes all we can offer each other is a safe place to feel insecure as we do our next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 270 of the Next Right Thing. Well, I hope this simple practice of listening to your friends can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow. Because while it's true, this is a podcast about making decisions, the bigger truth is our daily decisions are making our lives. As always, you can find me on Instagram @emilypfreeman and online at emilypfreeman.com, where you can find a transcript of this and every episode. And a special thanks to the team at Unmutable who faithfully edits and mixes our sound. And to Ashley Sherlock, our content manager, who's keeping me organized and creative in all Next Right Things, including our podcast tech and show notes. If you like what you hear, please leave a review at Apple Podcasts. It helps people find the next right thing who might not have otherwise listened. Thank you in advance for your time on that. Well, in closing, here's a short reading from poet David Gate, who, if you are not already following him on Instagram, I hope you'll fix that now.

He's @davidgate_ and his words are always right on time, including these about friendship. He writes, "Be kind about the names your friends give to their children. Praise their haircuts, love their tattoos. It doesn't really matter if that's what you would do. Like every selfie, all of them. Clap their songs, cheer them on. You were born with a limitless supply of encouragements. Use every one of them. Don't wait for the eulogies to speak out loud, that your friends are precious and they make you feel proud.

Thanks for listening, and I'll see you next time.