

ARE WE FRIENDS YET?



A Practitioner's Guide

*Using the book with clients navigating loneliness,
transition, boundaries, and connection.*

ALEX ALEXANDER

START HERE



FOR THERAPISTS & COACHES

When I started this work, I spent countless hours debating whether to go back to school and become a therapist. It felt like I needed a degree to be taken seriously. But the honest truth is that I do not want to dig into people's pasts, work through their problems, or run sessions. I want to tell stories. I want to share my own experiences, and the experiences of the people I meet, so there are more examples of the behind-closed-doors reality of friendship that so many people live but rarely talk about.

So that is what I did, first through my podcast, [Friendship IRL](#). To my surprise, therapists, coaches, and counselors began adding the FIRL Podcast to the recommendation lists they gave their clients. A therapist can only say "you are not the only one" so many times before it starts to sound hollow. But hearing someone else say it out loud, on a podcast, helps a person actually believe it.

You are here for the book, though, and this book is essentially my working thesis. It is built on my own lived experience and on the stories thousands of people have shared with me: through the podcast, and through private voice notes, emails, DMs, and conversations at events. Everyone, it turns out, has a story to tell, and I feel honored to hold them, even the ones I never publish. I have run all of it through my very neurodivergent, pattern-hungry brain, and the patterns I keep noticing are what you hold in your hands.

Here is where you come in. Loneliness and thin support systems sit underneath so much of what walks into a session: anxiety, burnout, transitions, people-pleasing, grief over friendships that faded without a name. This book gives clients shame-free language for all of it, plus tools they can use between sessions. It is not a treatment protocol or a substitute for your clinical judgment. I am an author and friendship educator, not a clinician. Use what fits your scope, your modality, and the person in front of you, and leave the rest.



HOW TO USE THIS BOOK IN YOUR WORK

A few notes before the chapter-by-chapter suggestions.

Who it tends to help

- Clients who feel isolated or “behind” on adult friendship, and carry shame about it.
- Clients in transition: a move, a breakup, new parenthood, an empty nest, retirement, a career shift.
- People-pleasers and over-functioners who struggle with boundaries and receiving support.
- Clients grieving a friendship that ended or quietly drifted, especially without a clear rupture.
- People (like me) who are short on support because of family conflict, estrangement, or emotionally immature family members. If a client needs proof that they can build a support system outside the traditional family structure, I have poured my own firsthand experience of doing exactly that into this book. *Find my story: the [short version](#), or the [long version](#).*

How the book’s frameworks map to the work

- **The Wheel of Connection** works as a low-pressure mapping and assessment tool. It externalizes the support system, surfaces gaps, and gives direction without overwhelm.
- **The three Roots of Connection** give clients shared language for what actually holds a relationship together, and for naming what changed when one shifted.
- **Shared experience roots** are the activities, interests, and time a relationship is built on. Concrete and behavioral, they pair naturally with activation, scheduling, and between-session homework.
- **Emotional intimacy roots** are the details, memories, and small moments of being known. The idea of “small intimacies” lowers the bar for clients with social anxiety or a fear of vulnerability, and lends itself to graded steps.

- **Story roots** are the beliefs and expectations a client holds about a relationship. They map naturally onto cognitive and narrative approaches, and onto disappointment, mind-reading, and rigid relational rules.
- **Track Your Time** functions like a self-monitoring or behavioral-activation log for clients who insist they “have no time” for connection.
- **Boundaries as bridges** reframes boundaries from walls into invitations, useful for resentment, over-giving, and conflict avoidance.

Using the prompts

Each chapter below offers a short note on where it tends to be useful, plus a couple of open prompts. They are written to support autonomy and reflection, in the spirit of motivational interviewing, not to lead a client to a “correct” answer. Use them in session, or assign a chapter and a prompt as between-session reflection.



APPLICATIONS & PROMPTS

Each chapter offers a brief note on where it tends to help, plus a couple of open prompts you can pose in session or assign as reflection.

CHAPTER 1

Recognizing Your Current Reality

“Friendships should feel good.”

USING IT IN SESSION: A nonjudgmental baseline. Helpful early, to let a client describe their current support landscape without shame. Pairs well with the book’s “You Are Here” map as an intake-style snapshot.

- When you say you are “struggling with” a relationship, what comes up first: guilt, grief, anger, relief?
- Where in your life do you already feel supported, and where is the gap most felt?

CHAPTER 2

Defining Your Boundaries

“Boundaries are the secret to building fulfilling connections that feel easy.”

USING IT IN SESSION: Reframes boundaries from walls to bridges. Useful for people-pleasing, over-functioning, and the resentment that builds when someone never says no.

- What would a boundary that makes you a more sustainable friend, rather than a worse one, look like?
- Where do you say yes and mean no, and what does that pattern cost you?

CHAPTER 3

Getting a Better Handle on Your Time

“It’s not about whether or not you are using your time efficiently; it’s about whether you are using your time in ways that bring meaning to your life.”

USING IT IN SESSION: A values-based, behavioral look at time. The Track Your Time exercise works like a self-monitoring log for clients who frame connection as a time problem.

- Where does your time actually go, compared with where you want it to go?
- What is one small, intentional shift you would be willing to test this week?

CHAPTER 4

Building Strong Friendship Habits

“We don’t typically think of friendship as an area of our life built on habits, but it is.”

USING IT IN SESSION: Habit-stacking and initiation patterns. Useful for clients stuck waiting to be chosen, or who label themselves a “bad friend.” Externalizes friendship as a skill, not a character flaw.

- Are you usually the initiator or the one who waits, and what might waiting protect you from?
- What connection habit could you anchor to a routine you already have?

CHAPTER 5

The Three Fundamental Stages of Friendship

“All friendships start because you meet a person in a place. It’s that simple.”

USING IT IN SESSION: Introduces the Roots framework and normalizes that not every friendship is close. Helpful for all-or-nothing thinking about relationships.

- Where do you actually meet people, and what tends to get in the way of staying in touch?
- Which relationships feel right exactly at the level they are right now?

CHAPTER 6

Shared Experience Roots

“Not everyone has to be a close friend to bring value to your life.”

USING IT IN SESSION: Frequency and consistency as concrete mechanisms of closeness. Good for clients who want connection but skip the repetition that builds it.

- Where do you already have a rhythm with someone, even a small one?
- What low-stakes shared activity feels genuinely doable for you?

CHAPTER 7

Emotional Intimacy Roots

“Moments are fleeting. Memories last.”

USING IT IN SESSION: Distinguishes authenticity from deep disclosure. The “small intimacies” idea lowers the bar for clients with social anxiety or fear of vulnerability, and lends itself to graded steps.

- What is one small intimacy you could offer someone this week?
- What do you notice in yourself when another person lets you in, even a little?

CHAPTER 8

Story Roots

“Our beliefs are often the reason we take action.”

USING IT IN SESSION: Belief and expectation work. Maps onto cognitive and narrative approaches, and onto disappointment, assumptions, and rigid relational rules.

- What belief or expectation are you holding about this person?
- What evidence built that story, and is it still true today?

CHAPTER 9

Recognizing Your People

“You are the center of an interconnected web of humans.”

USING IT IN SESSION: The Wheel of Connection as a practical mapping and assessment tool. Use it to externalize the support system, name gaps, and set direction.

- As you look at your wheel, which categories feel full, and which feel empty?
- Where would you most like to grow, and what is one realistic move toward it?

CHAPTER 10

Building Your Support System

“We are not meant to move through life alone. We are social creatures.”

USING IT IN SESSION: Reframes reciprocity, or scorekeeping, as nourishment. Useful for resentment, over-giving, and difficulty receiving. Touches capacity and self-worth.

- Where are you keeping score, and what might change if you set the ledger down?
- Is offering help or receiving it harder for you, and what is underneath that?
- What is a friendship strength you can offer freely, without resentment or burnout? (Think small, so it stays sustainable.)

CHAPTER 11

Understanding How Our Connections Grow and Change

“What holds our friendships and relationships together is constantly changing, and we are scrambling to adjust without always understanding what is happening.”

USING IT IN SESSION: Normalizes change and loss as developmental rather than as failure. Useful for clients catastrophizing a drifting friendship.

- Which connection has shifted, and which root actually changed?
- What becomes possible when a change in a friendship is not the same as a failure?

CHAPTER 12

Nurturing Your Relationships

“No friendship is maintenance free—and don’t forget, maintenance can be mutually beneficial!”

USING IT IN SESSION: Moves from insight to maintenance with concrete, doable actions. Works well as between-session homework.

- Which relationship is worth some intentional tending right now?
- What is one specific way you could show up for that person this month?

CHAPTER 13

Reimagining Your Community

“You only stop making new friends when you are in the grave.”

USING IT IN SESSION: Counters “it is too late for me” beliefs and all-or-nothing framing, and opens possibility. Useful in transitions and after losses.

- Where is there an opening for new connection that you have been discounting?
- What would “enough” community actually look like for you?

CHAPTER 14

Learning to Let Go

“Different isn’t bad; it’s just different.”

USING IT IN SESSION: Grief and acceptance work around friendships that fade or end. Holds loss with compassion; pairs naturally with values clarification.

- Is there a relationship you are mourning for what it used to be?
- What might letting it shift, rather than end, make room for?

CHAPTER 15

Embracing the Future and Taking Action

“Trust that small actions add up.”

USING IT IN SESSION: Consolidation and planning. Small, consistent, values-based steps. A good fit for goal-setting or winding down a course of work.

- What is one small, imperfect step you are genuinely willing to take?
- Who do you want to invest in, and what is the very next move?

CHAPTER BONUS CHAPTER

Bonus Chapter: Back to the Basics

“Little shifts count. Big shifts count.”

USING IT IN SESSION: A returning-to check-in. Useful for review sessions or maintenance-style follow-up.

- What has shifted since you started this work?
- What is the next small thing worth protecting?



CLOSING

A NOTE TO YOU

Used well, this book does some of the slow, normalizing work for you between sessions: it gives clients language, lowers shame, and turns “I have no friends” into something specific enough to act on. Your job is the part it cannot do, the relationship, the timing, and the clinical judgment about what each person is ready for.

A standing reminder: adapt freely, stay within your scope, and trust what you know about the person in the room over anything printed here.

One more thing, author to practitioner. Because this book is a working thesis, I would genuinely love to talk with more clinicians. Do you see places that need more nuance? Ideas worth expanding? Use cases I have not thought of? I want to hear them. My honest hope is that in ten years this book looks different. Not because it was wrong, but because we will have had enough of these conversations, and the dataset will have grown so large that there is no choice but to revise and rewrite.

If anything here sparked a thought, reach me at alex@alexalexander.com. I would love to compare notes.

With real appreciation for the work you do.