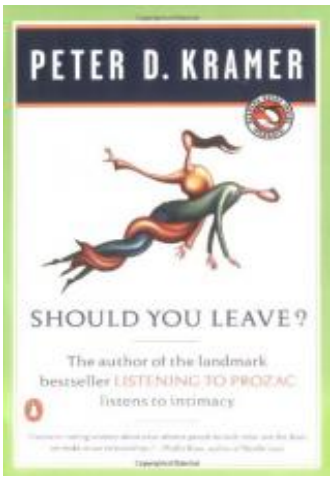
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Should You Leave?

by Peter D. Kramer



About the Book

> "When a psychiatrist writes a bestseller, he is then urged to write a book of advice. But I think our culture's awash in advice. The problem is we don't know whether it applies to us or whether we're an exception."
> -- Peter D. Kramer, from an interview with the **Detroit News**

In **Should You Leave?** Dr. Peter Kramer explains why therapists often refuse to give patients answers to questions. In contrast to the self-help books that crowd the shelves, **Should You Leave?** questions the very existence of objective advice -- for giver and receiver. What masquerades as advice, he argues, is often little more than a general transmission of values. Real advice can begin only with a thorough understanding of the individual advice seeker, who may or may not share the same values or belief system as the adviser.

In what he describes as "a hybrid of fiction, non-fiction, and self-help," he spotlights a wide range of fictional patients -- all close to breaking up with their partners -- from a kaleidoscopic series of viewpoints, speaking simply to "you," the composite patient. Whether any of these individuals should leave is no easy question.

First, the variables of personality and the dynamics of relationships and circumstances invite an endless array of interpretations, scenarios, and solutions (just as in the best of fiction, which Kramer calls "the most serious attempt to understand the human condition").

Second, the entire concept of relationships is rooted in an interplay between values of self and other. To this debate, filtered through his fictional mentor, "Lou," Dr. Kramer introduces major perspectives from philosophy and clinical psychiatric thought. They range from Freud's theories of the early family to Murray Bowen's championship of individualism in context; and from Leston Havens's pathology of possessor and possessed to Martin Buber's view of personhood as indivisible from relationship. Each patient in**Should You Leave?** can be viewed through the lens of one

or more of these theories.

Iris, a self-made and flamboyant editor, is confronted with a cruel betrayal by Randall, whom she feels to be her ideal partner. To stay would be, according to Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy's "relational ethics," investing in a love with no payback. Murray Bowen would want Iris to assert her autonomy. Jean Baker Miller, with her stress on "relational awareness," might see the strength of Iris's attachment as a greater personal and social good. Whereas Kramer wonders if she might translate her autonomy skills in business into a relationship with Randall that could foster similar growth in him.

Rose, a feisty but nurturing Irishwoman, and Abie, a Jew of Mediterranean heritage, have fed into their ethnic stereotypes of each other. To Melanie Klein or Henry Dicks, the pioneer of couple therapy, their "mutual projective identification" is cause for a breakup. But Kramer speculates on a cluster of factors: on the real balance of power in the relationship; on whether Rose could leave if the courts denied her child custody; on whether she will settle for staying because Abie, though violent, is the best deal she's yet found in a man.

From these psychiatric masters, and writers from Shakespeare and Ralph Waldo Emerson to James Joyce and John Updike -- even from a cultural about-face by Ann Landers -- **Should You Leave?** draws lessons on the importance of everyday detail and "selective inattention," emotional maturity in the context of conflicting ideals, and how to distinguish a truly independent self from its manifestation in a relationship. Kramer moves us beyond a simplistic "Mars and Venus" image of men and women toward a more subtle review of the intricacies of communication in general. How do mood states -- including, so often, depression -- affect our assessment of each other? What does "working on a relationship" entail? When should we work to improve a relationship, and when should we walk away?

Ultimately, this book places the personal balancing act of autonomy, connection, and community in a larger context. It also challenges conventional ideas of intimacy: Has our culture miscast marriage as an entitlement to happiness? Are gender differences an intrinsic roadblock toward intimacy? How far will personal growth go toward saving and transforming a relationship? Can our society, in fact, survive with autonomy as its ideal -- or are we overripe for a return to connectedness and contractual responsibility?

Should you leave? In the end, concludes Dr. Kramer, the only valid advice will be found in a garment woven from threads explored in this book -- tailored exclusively to each one of us.

Discussion Guide

1."When I read a self-help precept," says Dr. Kramer, "invariably I think that the opposite advice might be equally apt, for someone." Has his concept of targeted advice, and multiple perspectives, made this book of value to you?

2. How have you found **Should You Leave?** different from typical self-help books on relationship problems? What insights have you gained from its unique approach?

3. Does its ambiguous use of second-person narrative clarify its message? How does that technique reflect the intimacy and tensions of relationships?

4. In illustrating some of his points, Dr. Kramer refers to Anna Karenina, King Lear, and the Bible. Do you agree that a response to fiction can be more useful than a list of precepts? What works of fiction have produced that sort of response in you?

5. Do you feel a clash between autonomy and connection? Are women really more connected than men? Was the psychiatrist Murray Bowen, as recounted in **Should You Leave?**, right to manipulate his family to achieve both?

6. Is connection just an avoidance of selfhood, as some say, or is America blinded by its ongoing romance with autonomy? How should we, in this day and age, rate the Emersonian ideal of auton-omy and the self-reliant individual? Or the "me first" revolution of the past decades? How has feminism balanced the tension between independence and attachment? How do you, or others you know, manage it -- or are the two mutually exclusive?

7. Is it possible to talk about things that are good for a relationship as opposed to what is good and bad for the people involved in it? Is a relationship an entity?

8. Dr. Kramer quotes the feminist Katha Pollitt's remark that "men are from Illinois and women are from Indiana," and adds: "They are different, but not in especially confusing ways...they are adapted to cope with one another." Do you agree? How much does gender matter; and what does the story of Connie in **Should You Leave?** tell us about it? Does "Lou" gain power and meaning from being genderless?

9. Which "patients" in the book do you identify with most? Why?

10. Dr. Kramer writes about the complexities, and different styles, of relationships between therapist and clients. What has been your experience of these?

11. In the story of Melanie, Dr. Kramer questions Martin Buber's position that "objective entitlement," or justice, exists within a relationship. What do you think?

12. Are you well-matched with your spouse? If not, why not? What is "matching"? What is growing together? Is either of you depressed; and how could this have a negative, or even a positive, effect on events?

13. Does Dr. Kramer's description of "re-entering the marriage" at a higher level of consciousness and detachment open the door to a spiritual evolution?

Author Bio

Peter D. Kramer received his M.D. from Harvard. A clinical professor of psychiatry at Brown University, he has a private practice in Providence, Rhode Island. He is the author of **Moments of Engagement: Intimate Psychotherapy in a Technological Age** and the landmark bestseller**Listening to Prozac**. His writings have appeared in **The New York Times**,**The Washington Post**, and other national publications.

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Publication Date: January 1, 1999
Paperback: 320 pages
Publisher: Penguin (Non-Classics)
ISBN-10: 0140272798
ISBN-13: 9780140272796