

Footing the Bill on Friendship

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Need someone to go to the movies with? Desperate to try that hip new restaurant but don't want to go alone? Good news: There is someone who would love to do all those things with you...for a price.

In the past few years, online "friend rental" services have been growing in popularity, offering users a chance to pay for (nonsexual) companionship. The "friends" determine their rates, either by specific activities or for predetermined lengths of time, and users have the opportunity to choose the person (or price range) best suited to their needs.

RentAFriend, the most popular such site, claims to have much more than 500,000 friends available worldwide for everything from museum visits to skydiving. But in order to get in touch with them, users need to cough up a \$24.95/month membership fee.

Helen White, a Boston-based friend, says she has been paid \$20 an hour just for her company. "We went to a concert together," she says of one date. "All in all, I made \$60, plus he bought my drinks. It was actually very natural; there wasn't any awkwardness, like you might expect. We had a great conversation."

But not all users have such positive experiences. Though the site is very clear about its zero-tolerance policy for non-platonic requests,(...) Helen turned down one friend-seeker because she "felt he was basically asking for sex," and she uses a pseudonym on her profile (and in this article) in order to protect her privacy. The sheer number of warnings against non-platonic requests implies that they're a frequent problem for the site.

Beyond potential safety concerns, some mental-health professionals question the underlying premise: the idea that friendship is something that should, or even can, be bought. Dr. Carole Lieberman, a Beverly Hills psychiatrist, says that the very existence of *RentAFriend* is "an incredibly sad commentary on the state of human relationships."

"Real friendship comes from shared experiences and values, and in true friendships, friends are equal," says Lieberman. "Renting friendship is by its very nature untrustworthy, unequal and temporary. Once you stop paying, that person will no longer be there for you; that's the antithesis of friendship, if you ask me."

"People are more estranged from one another than ever before," she says. "They go out together only to spend the night glued to their phones. If I had a patient considering this, I'd work to find out what's preventing him or her from connecting with people organically in the first place, and work on solutions to that problem. This service is a Band-Aid fix for serious psychological problems."

Kathy Nickerson, a psychologist and marriage counselor based out of Orange County in California, originally felt the service could be useful, but has since come around to Lieberman's point of view. "I had a client who wanted to try this service," she recalls. "At first I was skeptical, but the woman she connected with through the site turned into a true friend. Her outcome was so good, I recommended it to another client who was feeling lonely and isolated.

"It was absolutely the wrong fit. In the end, she wound up feeling more depressed, and questioning what was so fundamentally wrong with her that she would have to pay people for friendship," says Nickerson. "After that experience, I've become very wary of the site, especially for people who might seem like the best candidates: those who are in a bad place emotionally, and really need a friend. For them, I think the site actually does more harm than good."

(598 words)