

“So you want a cheeseburger with a coke. Any pants with that?”



Ready, set, spill: (from left to right) Shehana, Penny, Dr Jacqui, Kristina and Theresa.

Shrink Parties

✓ BYO WINE ✓ CHEESE AND ... ISSUES

Just you, the girls, a bottle of wine ... and a psychologist. Penny Carroll tests out the new trend in therapy

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NICK ONKEN AND PHILIP CASTLETON/ACP

It could be a typical Friday night: I'm sitting around a dinner table with three close girlfriends, clutching a glass of wine and laughing about my neuroses. Except there's a psychologist sitting to my left – and she's here to work. This is a Shrink Party – a new trend gaining ground in the US and the UK that's allowing women to do what they do best: multi-task. One part girls' night in, one part therapy session, it is just so brilliant in its simplicity that I don't know why it's not already commonplace.

Getting together

Here's the concept: you get a group of your girlfriends together for a catch-up over some wine, cheese and crackers, and hire a psychologist to join you (in the UK, psychologists offer special Shrink Party rates. Here in Australia, you're more likely to pay for a group therapy session rate – around \$71 per person, per hour). Then, when you're ready to start swapping stories, an expert is right there to offer sound, professional advice.

I love the theory, but putting it into practice? Not so easy. The idea of

sharing personal problems in a social setting was too confronting for some of my girlfriends, and hearing their arguments made me nervous myself. What if I reveal too much about myself and regret it later? And what if our girl-group mojo disappears in the company of a complete stranger? Luckily, I've found three brave friends – Theresa, Kristina and Shehana – who are ready to break new ground, plus a clinical psychologist willing to road-test this new approach to therapy. Before we have our party, our shrink, Dr Jacqueline Saad, meets with us all individually to get to know us, which helps break the ice before the big day. Then all we have to do is get our issues in order.

Therapy's in session

Before the party gets started, Dr Jacqui – we're on a first-name basis now – explains what to expect. In particular, she asks each of us not to play “junior

shrink” (i.e. dish out our own advice) so no one feels judged. “But if there's something you can relate to, I'll ask you to share your experience,” she says.

As host and instigator, I feel it's my duty to kick off the night's proceedings, but suddenly the topics I prepared seem so ... lame. With my face flushing, I launch into a rambling explanation about how I often worry too much and find it hard to switch off my thoughts. Thankfully, I have a sympathetic crowd – soon everyone is nodding. Dr Jacqui agrees it's a normal problem and my confidence is buoyed.

Her advice is to change my thought process. “Be very conscious of the messages you're sending yourself,” she says. “Learn to talk to yourself in a positive way when something stresses you and say, ‘This is temporary. I know I have the skills to cope with this issue, so I'll go and do something that makes me happy.’ This way, you're replacing that negative thinking with a positive behaviour.” Good advice, and definitely a different angle to what my friends would have said.

Friendly approach

My confession prompts Kristina to admit she's a “natural worrywart” who's always anxious about what's around the corner. She really wants to focus on the present, but doesn't know how. “It's called fortune-telling,” Dr Jacqui points out. “It's like you've got a pair of blinkers on. You could have the best opportunity right in front of you and you'll completely miss it. It sounds so cliché to say ‘Live in the moment’, but the more we practise it the easier it gets. Try to focus on what you've achieved, rather than what's missing in your life.”

Dr Jacqui is so approachable, it's difficult to not blurt out my whole life story. She tells me she wanted to try the

“You don't have to have a disorder to speak to someone. It's about addressing everyday problems...”

It's Shehana's (left) turn to share as Dr Jacqui looks on.



Kristina (left) and Theresa open up about their lives.



Dr Jacqueline Saad is a Sydney-based registered psychologist. For info, visit jacquelinesaad.com.au or call (02) 9222 3222.

Shrink Party etiquette

✓ **DO** keep the group small so everyone gets a chance to speak, and ask your friends to come prepared with a problem they're comfortable sharing.

✗ **DON'T** pressure anyone into joining the party if they don't want to. It's vital everyone is comfortable with the idea and knows what to expect.

✓ **DO** seek out a registered psychologist and be aware they may ask to meet the party guests beforehand and sign a confidentiality agreement.

✗ **DON'T** feel obligated to divulge your deepest, darkest secrets. Remember, you will see these people again! If one of the topics touches a nerve, consider following up with a solo session later.

✓ **DO** remember it's a party! Relax, have a glass of wine, enjoy a few laughs with your girlfriends, and just have fun!

Shrink Party because she's passionate about breaking stuffy psychologist stereotypes. "You don't have to have a disorder to speak to someone," she says. "It's about addressing everyday problems and improving our emotional wellbeing."

Swapping stories

Dr Jacqui's warmth gets Theresa and Shehana talking about an issue they're both struggling with: breaking free of family expectations. "We're from ethnic backgrounds where we're told to plan for the future and delay gratification," Theresa says. "It goes back to early childhood and it's hard to disconnect from that."

"Guilt's a really big one," Dr Jacqui acknowledges – and we can all relate. "Why not embody both sides? Still respect what you appreciate about the culture, but take that freedom for yourself and gently instil a bit of change."

Her words aren't a revelation, but both girls agreed it was a relief to have their feelings validated by a professional. "I just wish we had more time," Theresa says. "I feel like we only scratched the surface."

The topics shift quickly, though, and by the end of the hour we've all swapped stories about "people-pleasing", I've discussed my relationship fears, and we've workshopped career fulfilment versus financial security. I'm all too aware that I've starred heavily in the night's conversation, but Dr Jacqui is great at subtly redirecting the focus. "When I sensed you were getting the most hits, I tried to even it out a little," she tells me later.

Post-party thoughts

When the party wraps up, we're all on a high. I'm excited by how fun it was, and instead of craving more time with Dr Jacqui

as I expected, I feel satisfied – like a weight has been lifted. Kristina, who was the most apprehensive, says she loved Dr Jacqui's advice on living in the moment, while Theresa appreciated the non-threatening atmosphere. Shehana, however, wanted more group discussion. "I didn't feel like I could interject for fear of being a 'junior shrink', but I liked Dr Jacqui's positivity and empowerment messages," she says.

It was an experiment for our psychologist, too, and she tells me that while she enjoyed the experience, she'd still rather the traditional approach. "I think a Shrink Party is a good preview for people to dabble in therapy," Dr Jacqui says. "However, I would prefer to see people one-on-one, so I can give them a more individualised service."

When the excitement wears off, the niggling worry that I monopolised Dr Jacqui's attention lingers – it appears my worrywart pattern needs a little more work yet. Hmm ... anyone having a Shrink Party I can crash? ☐