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Helping Relationships in Everyday Life

In modern society people in many walks of life spend some or most of their time "helping" others. Thus we have what are called the "helping professions": nursing, social work, child care, counselling, ministering, psychotherapy and teaching, just to name a few. For example, in a school the superintendent helps the principal, the principal helps the teachers, the teachers help each other and the students. At least that's the way it works in some schools. Yet we frequently have difficulty helping each other. We know that helping can either help or hinder. Some varieties of help are worse than no help at all. Most of us don't really understand the process of helping very well.

How does one person help another? That seems to be a straight-forward question. Unfortunately the answer often is "You just tell him what he wants to know or needs to know." If we are not very thoughtful we assume that another person should take our advice. After all, it's pretty good, isn't it? However, if we are thoughtful, we realize that two lives are never quite the same; what works as a solution in one life may turn out to be a disaster in another. Most people do not take advice, and for a very good reason: it quite probably is either wrong, or will not work in their particular situation.

Let us turn the question around and ask it this way: "When people are really helpful to us what do they do?" This lets us realize the many times we have had help foisted on us--people have tried to impose their solutions on our problems. And if that wasn't bad enough, they became angry or resentful toward us for not taking their advice!! Perhaps you can remember asking someone a simple question. And then the other guy talked a long time without answering you. Or when someone took over and tried to solve a troubling matter for you, making the whole affair even more difficult. Or when someone tried to smooth

things over and attempted to persuade you that nothing was the matter. In such instances we definitely do not feel helped. Rather, such responses serve to make us feel even more unable or troubled.

It is very difficult to describe the instance when someone was truly helpful to us. Perhaps all we can remember is that we talked with him for a while; and we began to think more clearly, about the difficulties we were having.

1. He made it clear to us that he was not "taking over" the problem. It was still our problem--we had the responsibility for it and we had to do our own thinking about it. Maybe we resented a little his not giving us an immediate solution, but he helped us to see that he couldn't solve the problem for us.
2. He indicated in many ways that we were neither "stupid" nor "unusual" because we had a problem. We didn't feel branded as failures. He accepted our problem as a matter of course.
3. He helped us see the values of working on the problems. He pointed out that it would be very much worth our while to seek the best answer to the problem, and he made us feel encouraged about it.
4. He seemed to be aware of some reasons why we were having the difficulty, but he didn't tell us what was "wrong" with us. He helped us to find a positive approach to the problem and to discover our own confusions in thinking.
5. He asked us valuable questions about the nature of the problem, why it occurred, and what symptoms of it were evident. He helped us to see the need for diagnosing the problem before thinking about solutions to it.
6. As we talked further, he helped us to set up some criteria for testing our ideas about solutions. We found it much easier to determine which ideas were likely to be fruitful.

Three things happened to us when we were helped in this way:

- a) We were allowed to maintain our personal integrity and self-respect.
- b) We were given increased motivation to work on the problem.
- c) We were given help on methods of solving problems.

We gained both a greater confidence in ourselves, and an increased ability to cope with our own problems.

These principles suggest the need for a basic attitude on our part when we are trying to be helpful. Rather than asking ourselves, when someone comes for help, "How can I advise this person to solve his puzzle as I see it", we must focus on the person who has the problem and try to understand why he is having difficulty, instead of focusing on the problem he brings. We need to remember that it is a problem for this particular individual, and that, no doubt, it exists primarily because of confused thinking, inappropriate attitudes, or misinterpreted impressions. These are the things we must work with.

For many of us this approach is not easy to use. If, for example, we are working as curriculum consultants and a teacher asks for help in developing some project, we are likely, as specialists, to think first about projects that might be good. We are not likely to ask ourselves why this person is needing help and how we can help him to select or to develop projects he can use. If we are family counsellors and parents want help in working with their child, we may be ready to tell them how we would handle the situation, instead of remembering that others cannot take over our methods and employ them effectively. They need help in thinking clearly about what they can do that is effective.

Whether or not 'help' is given always depends on the psychological conditions of the relationship between two individuals. If the general relationship is not a satisfactory one, then at the point when help is needed, a helpee who fears or distrusts the helper cannot be 'helped' by that particular helper at that particular time.

It is also important for each of us to recognize that we enjoy helping people because it satisfies certain of our needs. This enjoyment is certainly legitimate if our primary satisfaction comes from watching and assisting growth to occur in other people. But it is harmful if, as is sometimes the case, we gain our satisfaction because helping other people gives us opportunities to prove to ourselves how "good" we are. The person being helped will very frequently recognize attitudes of this sort and he will not be willing to accept help on that basis.

Those of us who are trying to help people must assume primary responsibility for the relationship between ourselves and those we are trying to help. (When an individual is concerned about a problem in his life, he cannot also be expected to accept primary responsibility for the relationship between himself and the helper.) Only rarely can such a person say "This is the problem I have and this is how you can help me". If he is able to do this, he is already moving toward a solution.

Nothing has been said so far about the place of information or facts in helping people, even though our most frequent response to a request for help is to attempt to supply information, or at least opinion. It seems evident that a person can be helped effectively by information only after these conditions have been obtained: he must feel some emotional security in dealing with the problem, he must be motivated to work on the problem, and he must have some concept of the difference between needing information and needing clarification:

Many times when a person asks for help he already has ample information at hand, but his difficulty arises because he has not been able to put it together in a form which will help him. And so, the job becomes one of discovering relationships among facts, ideas, attitudes, and behaviour, and of applying them to a different situation. The skill which is needed in this case is that of helping him carry through a process of thinking.

Effective helpers have learned some basic communication or relating skills. They can use empathy. This means that they have learned how to put themselves in the other's place and see the world as the other sees it. The helper can respond with caring or respect. Caring is communicating to the other person that he matters, that you care what happens to him, and that you believe in his ability to do something about his difficulty, and that you will understand his dilemma and will aid him to take effective action. A helper is specific. He assists the client to recognize, understand and act on his own thoughts, feelings and experiences. He does not use clichés and generalities.

The true helper is real. He does not play games. Nor does he hide behind an official role. He is centered in his own being--he does not act out of "authority" or "status" or "politeness". The effective helper is able to confront. He is able to point out to another person behaviors which are destructive, phoney, or ambiguous. He knows that confrontation is for clarification and understanding and not for putting another person down.

Helping people is a complex job. We need to understand other people and the processes of individual change. We need to understand ourselves and our effects on other people, and to be able to control and modify our own behaviour as required. And, above all, we need to clarify the kinds of relationships between people in which help can be given and received most effectively.

GENTLE RAPE

Gentle
 but deep
 subtle
 like it's
 not happening
 slowly
 with a little
 guilt
 and with
 apologies
 the rape
 goes on
 plundering
 that part
 of me
 that carefully
 houses
 my spirit
 and my
 life.
 So polite
 the rape
 that when
 slow death
 finally comes
 it will be
 to almost all
 a shocking
 grim
 surprise.

Jani Nyborg Sherrard

The world tends to trap and immobilize you in the role you play; and it is not always easy - in fact, it is always extremely hard - to maintain a kind of watchful, mocking distance between oneself as one appears to be and oneself as one actually is.

James Baldwin