

## A Better “Fix”

*The hunger to be known exceeds the hunger to be loved.* Daniel Gottlieb

It's hard to watch the people we care about suffer. Sometimes we are so connected to them that we hurt when they do. Sometimes we believe that we are responsible for their suffering and feel guilty and/or ashamed. Sometimes we secretly blame them for their problems and are sick of hearing them complain about it. Whatever our motivation, most of us respond by trying to help them “fix” their problem(s). We do this by telling jokes, offering advice, butting in and taking care of the problem ourselves, challenging or correcting their faulty thinking, or subtly or not so subtly telling them to shut up. And then, when the other person rejects or dismisses our help, as people generally do when they are offered unsolicited help, we feel hurt or angry.

The problem begins because we approach the issue rationally and offer a logical solution in much the same way we approach any other problem. Your gas tank is empty, fill it up. You accidentally throw a tennis ball through the kitchen window playing catch with your dog, fix the window. You drop your cell phone in the toilet, get a new one. Following this logic, it makes sense that if someone is suffering; they just need to be “fixed.” The catch is that emotional pain can't be fixed logically. Feelings are seated in the limbic brain so the rational mechanizing of the cerebral cortex doesn't touch the actual problem, at least not until the feelings have been acknowledged and addressed. Simply put, unsolicited “fixing” doesn't usually work.

Beyond this, our attempt to “fix” someone takes them away from their feelings. If someone is having a crappy day and you successfully get them to laugh about it, the anger, frustration, hurt or sadness doesn't necessarily go away, it just gets covered up -- patched up rather than healed. It's the same thing if someone is upset about something we said or did and we jump in to explain our words or behavior or correct their interpretation of them. So while cheering someone up or helping them understand our more compassionate intentions may be a great thing, it's best to let them have and express their feelings first.

If “fixing” someone rarely works, why do we do it? I think that at some level, even when the desire to help is rooted in the core of our hearts, the urge to “fix” someone stems from a desire to alleviate the discomfort that *we* feel in the face of their discomfort. We want to “fix” them so that *we* feel better.

Bearing witness to someone else's suffering can be anxiety producing because many of us were told in subtle and not so subtle ways that we were responsible for other people's feelings. We might have heard a parent or a sibling say, “You made me angry.” Or “You made me so proud.” Or we may have somehow picked up cues that told us that when Mom or Dad was unhappy, it was our fault\*. Because of these messages, it can be hard not to feel guilty, ashamed or even helpless in the face of someone else's suffering. This is even more intense for people who have experienced emotional and/or physical abuse because they paid an emotional and/or physical price when other people weren't

happy. It's a lot easier to try to "fix" someone else than to feel the anxiety, guilt, shame, or fear we feel when we see them in pain.

So what does work? Empathy. Take a moment to think about the last time you were suffering and had someone try to fix you. Maybe you had a crappy day at work. Maybe you got stuck in traffic. Maybe you'd just gotten dumped or were nervous about an upcoming date. Maybe you were inundated with paperwork and just felt overwhelmed. Remember how frustrated you felt when someone offered you advice? What was it that you really wanted?

I'm guessing that even if you wanted help, what you wanted first was to be heard, validated, understood and consoled. You wanted empathy. You wanted that other person to imaginatively step into your shoes, to feel what it was like for you in that moment. You wanted to be known and understood.

I saw the power of empathy a number of years ago when the woman I was involved with and I were in counseling to sort out the train wreck we'd made of our relationship. When the counselor asked us how we were doing, my partner launched into what sounded to me like a pity party about how much she hated her job. I'd heard this same rant numerous times and had tried my very best to "fix" the problem. She never took my advice and I was sick of hearing her complaints. The counselor took a different approach. She listened and responded with validating statements like: "That must feel really awful." "Sounds like your job really sucks." and "That must be really frustrating." When I had tried to "fix" her it was like she was a broken record and we usually ended up arguing. When she was given empathy, she relaxed and let it go.

The catch is that sometimes it's impossible to give someone else empathy unless you've gotten some empathy yourself. The beauty of this is that your impulse to "fix" someone is a cue to tune in and see what's going on with yourself. The question, "How is this a problem for me?" is a good place to start. If it's a problem because you feel anxious, you can explore what the anxiety is about. In other words, ask yourself, "What am I afraid will happen?" and then, "Is this really a likelihood?" and follow up with, for example, "Is it really likely that he or she will leave me right now?" or "Is it really true that she or he will yell at me or hit me?" (If the answer to this is yes, please call your local domestic violence shelter and speak to someone about getting out of this relationship because it is clearly not a safe place to be.) And then, instead of "fixing" the other person, give yourself some empathy, some compassion. Talk to yourself (silently works best) "yeah, it was really scary then, but it's safe now." Or, "I know, so and so abandoned you, and that really hurt." Once you have gotten your own needs met, then you can figure out how to help the other person.

\* The truth is that we can't make any one feel anything, but it's hard to remember that reality.

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