

The Best Advice

Most people have an area in their life where they just seem stuck. From the outside looking in, the solution to their problem looks crystal clear, and we cringe as they blindly overlook what seems obvious. From our vantage point, it's obvious that the person who's stuck just needs to quit the job that he or she has been complaining about for months, dump the boyfriend or girlfriend who's been unfaithful, tell her or his adult child or sibling who's been mooching off them for months or even years that the free ride is over, or discontinue the unhealthy relationship with their needy, dependent, critical and/or abusive partner or parent(s). Because the solution seems so obvious, it almost feels immoral not to give advice.

Unfortunately, life is rarely as simple as it looks, especially when relationships are involved. What looks so clear from the outside is actually tangled and murky on the inside because it involves emotions. Obvious solutions rarely work because they are totally rational and don't take emotional reality into account. From the perspective of the person who is stuck, these rational solutions often seem more painful than the original problem.

For example, Joyce*, a friend of mine, has been struggling for years with how to deal with her alcoholic mother. First, Joyce moved several states away, but that didn't stop the drunken phone calls. So Joyce refused to talk to her mother when she was drunk. Joyce carefully screened her calls and refused to pick up if her mother was drunk. Unfortunately, this strategy did nothing to stop the anguish of hearing her mother wallowing in self-pity over the latest self-inflicted crisis on the answering machine. Joyce quit listening to the messages, but she felt anguish every time she heard her mother's drunken voice. Finally, last year, Joyce quit talking to her mother entirely after she passed out at work, lost her job and the retirement package that went with it, and took up drinking full time. She even refused to respond when she got a call from the hospital after some drinking-related accident landed her mother in the emergency room. But after a few months, she relented. I asked why she didn't just write her mother off as she'd planned, and she told me, "I can't do it. I couldn't live with myself if I didn't do something to help my mom. I can't just stand by knowing that she's drinking herself to death."

The other part of the story is that I barely knew the details until I was house sitting. I didn't know that I was supposed to unplug the phone at night, and was shocked to wake up at 3:00 am to the phone ringing. I tried to ignore it, but it kept ringing, and ringing, and ringing. I finally answered it, thinking there might be some emergency that I needed to know about. Instead, it was Joyce's mother, drunk, wanting a shoulder to cry on. I was pissed about being woken up over nothing and hung up. When I broached the subject with Joyce's partner, she spilled the whole story. I asked her why Joyce hadn't said anything, and her partner told me that Joyce was embarrassed about her mother. The advice she inevitably got when she did talk about her mom made her feel even worse. Not only did she have an alcoholic mother, but she wasn't strong enough to just turn her back on her mother and walk away.

Most often, when people vent about their problems, they aren't looking for advice; they're looking for empathy. They usually just want someone to listen to them, to really hear how hard things are and to say, "Wow, that sounds really hard," so that they know that you understand them. Advice, no matter how well meaning, is always based on a judgment. Usually, it goes something like this: "You've got it all wrong. I know what you need to do, and I'm right." The paradox is that people don't make lasting changes in the face of judgment. They make changes when they feel complete acceptance for who they are and where they are in the moment. This idea lies at the root of many spiritual traditions including Christianity and Buddhism. If you really want to help people change, listen to them with compassion, try to understand where they're coming from and accept where they are. If the options they see don't make sense (i.e., they have only two extremes: walk away from my job and starve to death or stay at my job and be miserable), ask them to tell you more or just tell them the truth, that that sounds like an awful situation to be in. If

they ask for help, help them lay out a range of possibilities and the pros and cons of each. Let them decide which at the end of the day makes the most sense.

The uncomfortable truth is that advice often stems from our own frustrations and issues. Sometimes we're just sick of hearing someone go on and on about the same problem, so we give advice in an effort to fix them or at least shut them up. Other times, we feel guilty about how we dealt with a similar situation, so we give them advice to either make up for (i.e., "don't do what I did") or justify our own emotionally uncomfortable strategies. In both instances, rather than giving advice, what we really need to be saying is, "I really can't listen to your problem right now." If you feel really strongly about what someone you know is doing or not doing and feel an insuppressible urge to give advice, perhaps you should slow down, take a breath and ask yourself, "How is this a problem for me?" Then deal with your own issue rather than telling someone else what to do.

*Name and some details have been changed to protect her identity.

Originally appeared in Outlook Weekly