



Parkinson Association of Orange County

Finding Balance in the Giving and Receiving of Help

With Parkinson's Disease, as with most progressive conditions (including old age), there often comes a time when a person has to rely on others for some assistance. For a person who has always been independent, that need can make one very uncomfortable, especially if the need for help for oneself does not seem to be equal to the ability to offer help to others. It's human nature for people to want to give as much as they receive. But when one partner's ability to help becomes diminished by physical problems, it is often necessary to get very creative to maintain some balance between the giving and receiving of help between partners or family members.

Here is an example of such a situation taken from an article in *Today's Caregiver Magazine*. The text of the full article is available at the following URL: http://www.caregiver.com/articles/general/emotional_first_aid.htm

Helen had ALS, a progressively debilitating and usually fatal illness. Her biggest concern was not for her own future; it was for her husband, Frank, who was performing more and more care-giving tasks. Helen was afraid that her illness would have a crushing effect on her husband's health and spirits and she worried that her exchange with him would be out of balance.

Helen wanted to find a way to contribute something to Frank's wellbeing and she worked with a trauma counselor to resolve this issue. As she did so, she realized that the illness might have robbed her of the physical ability to be of help but she could still listen well and Frank certainly needed a good listener as he struggled to care for her and worried about the future. Helen received some training in how to be an attentive and compassionate listener and she and Frank began having conversations each evening where she coaxed him to talk about his whole life and about his concerns for the future.

It was a tremendous relief to Frank to be able to have the conversations each evening. The couple's close communication helped them work out a plan for Helen's care that was less stressful for her husband. Frank realized that the most important moments of the day were the ones when they were talking on a deep level and he continued to talk to Helen even after she had lost the ability to speak. At Helen's funeral Frank described those conversations as some of the happiest moments of his life.

It's vital to find ways for an ill person to contribute to the wellbeing of loved ones if it is at all possible. Even a very ill person may be able to learn to listen well and compassionately. If you're a caregiver, watch carefully for signs that the ill person wants to contribute and then make the effort to see if such a contribution is possible. If you are the person with a serious illness, make an effort to see if there are ways to remain helpful in spite of your illness. Enabling people to feel useful throughout their life is a tremendous gift to give them and finding a way to stay useful is a tremendous gift to oneself.

Listening well is a way of being helpful that almost anyone can do. If you would like to improve your ability to be a compassionate listener, read the following information which is taken from a training booklet on compassionate communication.

Learning to Listen Well: There are three qualities essential in a person who wants to be able to listen well. Those qualities are compassion, curiosity and persistence. No matter how much training you've had, if you're lacking in these three qualities, you'll be largely unable to listen well. No matter how little training you've had, if you possess these three qualities, you'll be able to help your fellow man effectively. We've all heard of people whose friends turn to them in times of trouble because they just know they'll feel much better if they talk to that person. Such people have a natural ability to be interested in others, non judgmental, and persistent enough to hear someone out.

Compassion: In order to experience relief from worries and traumatic incidents, people must be able to talk to you very freely and openly—and feel safe while doing so. Otherwise they won't be able to express the emotions, attitudes, and feelings that are necessary to gain relief. Consequently they won't feel much better after talking to you.

It doesn't matter how awful a thing they've done, or how ridiculous a thing they've done, they need to know you're not going to criticize them or feel critical of them. Then they'll speak freely and not try to protect or defend themselves by withholding their communication. That's where compassion enters into it. If people feel—whether you've openly expressed it or not—the least bit of criticalness on your part, they're going to start defending their actions. They'll try to



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convince you that their actions really weren't that bad or that they were justified. Any time spent defending their actions is time that won't benefit them.

Example

Alice had experienced the death of her husband and she'd been unable to recover fully from that death. Every time she thought of that event, the upset surfaced again. Alice had gone through a whole gamut of emotions: anger, fear, hostility, and grief. She was able to express the grief but not the anger. Alice felt that society frowned on a person being angry at a dead spouse and her anger was very strong. She was sure that people would consider it wrong or shameful if they knew how she felt. After all, her husband couldn't help dying. But it didn't help Alice to analytically know that her husband didn't choose to leave her. The fact is that she was very angry. A compassionate person helped Alice finally express the anger and she now feels tremendous relief.

If the person to whom you're speaking is known by you to be very compassionate, you'll probably try expressing a bit of the anger and watch them closely for their reaction. When you can see they're not horrified, shocked, or critical, you'll feel free to express a bit more. Eventually, you'll blow off all the steam that's necessary and feel much better. The whole difference in whether or not you're able to work through that cycle and get rid of those angry feelings will be the level of compassion that you perceive to be there on the part of the person to whom you're speaking.

Curiosity is the second trait that's a key factor in our ability to listen well. There are some people who feel that curiosity can be intrusive or upsetting. Curiosity is upsetting when it isn't coupled with compassion. If you're feeling that the other person is curious about you and that they have a critical feeling toward you or toward what they might find out about you, you'll find their curiosity or interest very upsetting. If you sense that the person is compassionate, then the interest or curiosity isn't upsetting. It is, in fact, very reassuring and comforting.

All of us enjoy having someone show a genuine compassionate interest in us. It's a trait that makes it possible for us to open up and speak freely. If you feel that the other person is bored or lacking interest in you or what you're saying, you're not going to talk very much. If you can sense that the other person has a very strong interest in what you are saying, and that they're compassionate, you'll find yourself being able to express those deep, dark secrets that have been hiding there way too long.

The last key factor is **persistence**. It sometimes takes a while to talk through an upsetting incident. If you don't have the persistence to get all the way through the incident, then you might as well not have started. We can't plunk someone down in the middle of a traumatic moment, let that person get all involved in it, and then not follow through long enough to complete the process. Our intent has to be to take our friends or loved ones all the way through.

If people got no other training at all but learned to be a little more compassionate, show a little more interest, and a little more persistence, they would have increased tremendously their ability to help someone. It would make them better able to help their friends, their children, their acquaintances, and their loved ones.

If you would like to learn more about how to be a great listener, check out the book, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Compassion* by Marshall B. Rosenberg.