



Intentional Presence: Friendship and Support Skills Helping Habits That Aren't Always Helpful

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Many of the habits we've learned for supporting people—like giving advice, cheering people up, or sharing our personal philosophy of life—are behaviors that people tend to experience as unsupportive. In this article, we'll explore unhelpful helping habits and the unseen beliefs that keep these habits in place. In closing, we'll review a set of new beliefs about emotions and emotional support that can help you to cultivate more skillful ways of supporting yourself and others.

When I ask people to describe support they've received from family, friends or helping professionals that didn't feel so supportive, they almost always say similar things. Last night in one of my classes, people came up with their own list of unsupportive helping habits. Not surprisingly, their list contained many of the same helping habits that past classes had already listed:

Helping Habits that Don't Feel Supportive

- Suggesting ways to fix my problem when I haven't asked for suggestions or advice
- Telling me how I should think or feel about the situation
- Lecturing me with philosophical or spiritual concepts
- Shifting the focus from my problems or experiences to theirs
- Pretending to listen when they're not
- Judging me or my feelings
- Falling into gossiping, complaining or commiserating with me

Here's a more comprehensive list of unhelpful helping habits that I've compiled over the years with examples of each habit in action:

Unhelpful Helping Habits	Example
Offering unsolicited advice	<i>You need to tell your daughter that she's got to start treating you more respectfully.</i>
Offering veiled unsolicited advice	<i>Example #1: Have you told your daughter that she needs to treat you more respectfully? Example #2: I always try to make sure I tell disrespectful people that they need to respect me.</i>
Telling people how they should think or feel	<i>You shouldn't feel so upset about this. It's such a little incident in the greater scheme of things.</i>
Lecturing with spiritual or philosophical theories or platitudes.	<i>You need to let go and let God. It's important to surrender your ego in situations like this.</i>
Shifting the focus to <i>your</i> problems or experiences	<i>I know how you feel. I've had that happen to me. Last week at work, I...</i>
Being dishonest, deceitful, or withholding your truth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Pretending to listen when you're not ⇒ Pretending to understand when you don't ⇒ Pretending to be calm when you're feeling emotional ⇒ Not speaking up when you feel disconnected
Judging, labeling or criticizing	<i>I don't get why you're reacting so strongly to your daughter's remarks. You're just too sensitive.</i>
Trying to figure out or analyze other people	<i>You're probably just feeling insecure because your father criticized you as a child.</i>
Shifting into gossiping, storytelling, or mutual complaining and commiserating	<i>Oh God, your boss sounds like such an idiot. My boss is a nutcase too. I can't believe how messed up organizations are. Why just the other day...")</i>
Trying to cheer people up or distract them from their problems	<i>Let's go out to a movie. That'll help you feel better.</i>
Trying to get people to focus on the positive	<i>You need to stop focusing on what's not working in this relationship and be grateful for all the good things it brings.</i>
Contradicting peoples' experiences or perceptions	<i>I can't imagine that your daughter would ever treat anyone so disrespectfully. Are you sure you've got the facts straight?</i>
Taking sides	<i>Your daughter's completely to blame in this situation. You've been a loving mother and she's got no right to treat</i>

	<i>you like this.</i>
Politely listening instead of expressing your emotions and needs	Bill starts to feel frustrated and disconnected as Sue talks about her daughter in a non-stop monologue. But instead of asking for what he needs to stay connected to Sue, he drifts off and pretends to listen.
Allowing people to vent	Bill allows Sue to vent on and on about her daughter, thinking this will help get her anger out of her system so she can see things more clearly. Unfortunately, venting makes Sue unable to do the quiet, deep inner listening that would help her identify and act on the needs behind her anger.
Gushing tense or anxious empathy or concern	<i>Oh you poor thing. I feel so sorry for you. Is there anything I can do to help? It just sickens me to know that you are hurting so badly. I'm here to help; you can count on me.</i>
Anticipating peoples' needs (as a way of managing your own anxiety, guilt, etc.)	<i>If you're tired of taking care of me, you could take the car and go out shopping if you want. Or you could take in a movie or take some time to rest. Or I could schedule you an appointment with my massage therapist.</i>

Why Do We Resort to Unhelpful Helping Habits?

Many of us have experienced at least some of the habits listed above as unhelpful. Given this, why do we continue to use them? Here are a few things that influence us to persist in using helping habits that aren't helpful:

1. Our teachers are unskilled.

Few of us learn emotional support skills from educated, emotionally aware teachers. As children, many of us pick up bad habits for working with emotions from our caretakers, friends, or siblings. When we see our parents hold back their feelings, refuse to talk about feelings, or blast out their emotions at others, we learn that these are "right" or acceptable ways of dealing with emotions. When parents, siblings or friends tease, judge, or punish us for feeling or expressing emotions, we learn to see emotions as wrong or shameful. When friends or family give us unsolicited advice or try to cheer us up, we unconsciously mimic these unhelpful habits when supporting others.

2. We don't think of emotional support as a skill we can study and learn.

We teach kids reading, writing, and arithmetic in school, but we don't teach them basic emotional awareness and support skills. In the past hundred years, psychology, neuroscience, and other disciplines have learned a lot about how the brain and emotions work. They've also made important discoveries about the elements of skillful emotional support and the negative consequences of poor emotional support. Although some therapists offer emotional support informed

by these discoveries, few parents receive state-of-the-art training in how to give effective emotional support, and as a result, few children learn these all-important skills.

Our family, friends, and other role models weren't unintelligent or bad people; they didn't teach us effective emotional support skills for one simple reason: because *no one ever taught them*. To break this vicious cycle, we need to make education in self-awareness and emotional support skills a top priority—a topic in K-12 and adult education as essential as reading, writing and arithmetic.

3. *Our society doesn't yet understand why emotional education is important.*

As I write this article, I'm living in Shelton, Connecticut. Three weeks ago, an emotionally troubled twenty-year old walked into the Sandy Hook Elementary School just a few miles from my home and gunned down twenty six innocent children and adults. Had this young man, his parents, and his teachers received good training in self-awareness and emotional support, this tragedy might never have happened.

Bullying, peer pressure, addictions, rape, murder and other harmful and violent behavior are just a few of the consequences of lack of formal education in emotional awareness and support skills. Instead of investing in K-12 and adult education programs to train teachers, parents, and kids in basic emotional support skills, we spend large sums of money on the back end on prisons, juvenile reform, therapy, psychiatric drugs, addiction rehab programs, and similar attempts to heal and rehabilitate others. We do this because we don't yet understand the true costs of our society's lack of emotional awareness.

DEFINITION
Helping Habit (n.)

A repeating, automatic and often unconscious behavior that we engage in to provide emotional or spiritual support to others

4. *Unseen beliefs keep us stuck in unsupportive habits.*

Our unseen beliefs about emotions and emotional support powerfully motivate our unhelpful helping habits. Not only do we learn unskillful helping habits from our childhood teachers, we also pick up *beliefs* that keep those habits in place. For example, when a child cries and expresses sadness, and a parent responds to that child by saying, "Stop your whimpering, or I'm going to give you something to cry about," that child can pick up all sorts of beliefs about emotions and emotional support, for example:

⇒ If I'm feeling sad, I'm going to upset someone.

⇒ Feeling sad is going to get me hurt, so I'd better never feel sad again.

⇒ If I'm feeling sad, I'm a bad person.

⇒ I need to hide my sadness and pretend to be happy when I'm not.

Beliefs like these can cause us to chronically repress our emotions and needs and view them as something negative, bad, and unwanted. If we push away our own emotions, it's hard to offer skillful emotional support to others, because *skillful support helps people to connect with and listen to their emotions and needs*. How can we help people to connect with their emotions and needs if we can't connect with our own?

Part of the reason it's so hard for us to support each other skillfully is that no one taught us to connect with our own emotions and needs, let alone express them gracefully. In fact, many of us were taught us the exact opposite: *Don't show me that emotion, or I'll give you something to cry about*.

Common Limiting Beliefs about Emotions and Emotional Support

The beliefs we've inherited from others about emotions and emotional support silently drive our unhelpful helping habits. These beliefs get passed down from generation to generation like psychological or spiritual DNA. Some psychologists call the unconsciously acquired beliefs that silently shape our actions *conditioning*. Some Eastern spiritual teachings refer to the beliefs that cause repeating and often unconscious actions as *karma*.

DEFINITION ***Emotional Support (n.)***

Interactions that help people to: a) open to and feel their emotions, b) listen to the needs their emotions communicate, c) get their own inner sense of actions that might meet their needs, and d) take effective actions to meet their needs

Below are a few common beliefs that make it hard for us to offer helpful emotional and spiritual support to others:

- ⇒ Emotions are negative and destructive.
- ⇒ Emotions create discomfort and suffering, so it's best to avoid them.
- ⇒ Expressing emotions is a sign of weakness.
- ⇒ Feeling or expressing emotions will get you in trouble or make things worse.
- ⇒ Emotions aren't spiritual, so you need to rise above them.

Beliefs are like viruses: they can infect us without our conscious knowledge, and sometimes the harm they create isn't obvious until years later. Most people in Western culture have unwittingly picked up at least a few beliefs similar to those above. Unfortunately, beliefs like these form the cornerstones of our culture. These

cornerstones need to be replaced if we are to build a healthier, happier, and more supportive society.

If you've unconsciously picked up any of the beliefs above over the years, your ability to offer effective emotional support is likely to be compromised. Intentional presence offers new perspectives and practices that can help you to shake off conditioned beliefs about emotions and offer more skillful support to yourself and others.

Our emotions aren't wrong or bad, and they're not the source of our suffering. It's our lack of skill in working with emotions that causes unnecessary pain and conflict in our lives.

Beliefs About Emotional Support That Drive Unskillful Helping Habits

One day while reviewing the list of unsupportive helping habits that class participants reported over the years, I noticed that every single unhelpful habit was linked to one of two beliefs:

Belief #1:

Emotions are bad, and good emotional support helps them to go away.¹

Most of us have been trained to believe that emotions are wrong, bad, unspiritual, destructive, etc. Similarly, our culture has conditioned us to believe that emotions are the source of our suffering. These beliefs naturally drive us to use helping habits that sweep peoples' feelings away instead helping people to listen and attend to their feelings, needs, and other inner experiences.

Intentional presence doesn't view emotions as negative or destructive. In our view, our emotions aren't wrong or bad, and they're not the source of our suffering. It's our lack of skill in working with emotions that causes unnecessary pain and conflict in our lives. In short, our beliefs about emotions and our lack of skill in working with them causes the bulk of our suffering—not emotions themselves.

When we think of emotions as negative or unspiritual, we tend to use helping habits that cause people to avoid, ignore, get rid of or rise above their emotions and other inner experiences. Each of the helping habits below is based on the belief that emotions are bad, and good emotional support makes them go away:

Helping Habit	Why We Unconsciously Use This Habit
Trying to cheer people up, distract them from their problems, or get them to focus on the positive	We do this to help people get away from what we see as "bad" or "negative" emotions.

¹ There are times when giving people a break from the intensity of their emotions can be supportive, for example, taking someone who's grieving to watch a movie. But in many cases, our attempts to distract people from their feelings keep them stuck by repeatedly helping them to avoid the very emotions and needs that have arisen to help them move forward in their lives.

Commiserating with others by complaining, blaming, or gossiping	These are common ways of repressing or ignoring our emotions.
Politely listening to people who repeatedly ramble on about their problems	Non-stop monologues are a common way people use to avoid their emotions; therefore, politely listening to such monologues typically supports people to avoid their emotions.
Gushing anxious, tense empathy or concern	This is a way of unconsciously leaking out our own fear or discomfort with other peoples' emotions.
Switching the focus of the conversation to your problems and experiences	People need inner quiet to connect with and listen to their emotions. Talking about our problems when supporting others creates "noise" that helps us to avoid the anxiety, sadness, and other emotions we feel as we listen to other peoples' challenges.
Politely listening when people drift off instead of expressing your emotions and needs	This is a way of avoiding our own emotions and needs.

Belief #2:

To support people, I need to offer my opinion of the right thing to do.

Skillful support assists people to listen to their own emotions, needs, and desires, their own inner sense of things, and their own inner guidance. Most of us have been trained to do the polar opposite: to offer people our sense of the right thing to do. Below are helping habits that arise from this belief²:

- ⇒ Offering unsolicited advice
- ⇒ Telling people how they should think or feel
- ⇒ Lecturing people with spiritual or philosophical theories and platitudes
- ⇒ Trying to figure out or analyze what's wrong with people

² Of course, there are times when providing information to people can be helpful. If someone can't afford to eat, providing them information about food stamp programs could be helpful. (That said, it could also be perceived as insulting.) If someone is considering therapy, sharing our experiences with psychotherapists could be helpful. (That said, it could also prejudice them in unsupportive ways.) Providing information is a support skill that requires discrimination. In general, I avoid providing information when: a) people haven't asked me for it, b) people haven't yet explored their own inner sense of things, and c) when I haven't asked permission to share my own insights and ideas. (You'll be surprised how many times people say "no" when you actually give them the choice of whether or not to hear your view of a situation. People want to discover *their* own inner truth about their challenges, not *ours*.)

⇒ Contradicting peoples' experiences or perceptions

Now that we've reviewed some of the beliefs that shape our current helping habits, let's take a moment to explore a completely new approach to supporting yourself and others in the midst of challenging emotions and life experiences.

Beliefs to Help You Cultivate New Helping Habits

The friendship and support skills that intentional presence offers are based on a new set of beliefs that you can test for yourself as you practice these skills with others. I've introduced these beliefs throughout this article, but I'll summarize them below:

- ⇒ Emotions, needs, and other inner experiences aren't destructive, lower, unspiritual, or bad. They're natural, enlivening, and creative forces.
- ⇒ Our emotions and needs don't create discomfort—avoiding them does.
- ⇒ Emotions and needs don't create violence, suffering, and limitation—our lack of skill in working with emotions and needs creates these unwanted consequences.
- ⇒ There are ways of expressing and attending to emotions and needs that are respectful, energizing, and supportive.
- ⇒ Skillful emotional support helps people listen to their emotions, needs and other inner experiences, and act on the guidance and wisdom they communicate.

Scholar Joseph Campbell once said, "If you want to change the world, you have to change the metaphor." The current metaphor governing emotional support is the archetype of good and evil: the notion that there are good and bad parts of our consciousness. In this view, emotions, needs and desires appear on the "bad" side of the score sheet. The metaphor that I believe will shape both informal and professional emotional support in the future is the archetype of unity or holism: the notion that every part of our consciousness is valuable and contributes in unique ways to the whole of our awareness.

As we bring new beliefs about emotions and emotional support to our relationships, we can turn friendship into a force for personal and social transformation. Supporting new types of emotional support to blossom in my own friendships has been the greatest achievement, gift, and joy of my lifetime. I want you to experience a similar shift in your friendships. If you're a helping professional, I want you to experience this shift in your helping relationships. Intentional presence is designed to help you to embrace this exciting and inspiring possibility.

Related Articles on Friendship and Support Skills

What Is Presence-Centered Friendship?

Supporting People to Speak What's Here

The articles above are available at www.intentionalpresence.com.

For an overview of some of the basic support skills that intentional presence teaches, see the article *Supporting People to Speak What's Here*.