



Encouragement

ARE YOU EMPOWERING GROWTH OR CAUSING RESISTANCE?

By Sharon Strand Ellison

I asked my four-year-old daughter, Ami, to help me carry the breakfast dishes to the kitchen. As we did it, I said, "You're such a good 'Mommy's little helper!'" She smiled and looked down, shyly. Then I said, "I like it when we clear the table together." Ami looked up at me, beaming, and said, "I love to help you, Mommy." I was so struck by the difference in how Ami responded to those two sentences that I never forgot this little conversation, which happened 40 years ago.

Why did these two comments have such a different impact?

The compliment about being "Mommy's helper" had pitfalls similar to common methods of encouragement, such as praise; but my comment about liking to clear the table together was not typical "praise."

Perhaps many traditional methods of giving encouragement actually help to entrench people in their own passivity and/or resistance to change.

After giving examples of common methods for giving encouragement and clarifying how they can backfire, I'll show what we can change to increase the likelihood of the other person becoming more actively engaged in constructive problem solving.

Common Methods of Giving Encouragement

We may use these pervasive methods of encouragement with friends and loved ones, and it's not uncommon for us to slip into some of these patterns when we are in our professional role counseling clients.

Praise is frequently used as a means to encouraging others to achieve certain goals. To someone who is struggling with addiction we might say, "You are such a beautiful person; everyone adores you!" Or, "You have always had such a strong

will!" Such positive statements are often an effort to help the person gain more self-esteem. While the praise and feedback may be true, the motivation for giving it often has a specific agenda: to counteract the person's negative self-image so she or he has the strength to face the addiction.

To an addicted person going through rehab we might say things like, "I know it feels really hard right now, but that's just a sign that you're getting the drugs out of your system and soon you'll feel like a different person." Here, we are trying to counteract discouragement the person might be feeling by reframing the experience-giving the words a different meaning. The underlying message is likely to be, "The pain you are feeling right now doesn't need to discourage you, or cause you to give up; it's a sign that you are going to get better."

Such comments are typical of the countless sincere efforts people make to bring a positive energy and support to youth and adults who are struggling with addiction, or any other challenge. Sadly, if they don't respond as we hope, we may feel frustrated, defeated or angry. These emotions can be revealed in our attitude and transform support into advice that carries, however subtly, a more critical tone.

How and Why Common Methods of Giving Encouragement Backfire

However positive our efforts may seem, these ways of expressing support have at least one or more of the following key problems:

- having the intention of helping which puts us in the superior role and the other person in a one-down position;
- giving praise that labels the person in some way that may be contrary to their own view of themselves;
- stating opinion as fact;

- countering the other person's negative attitude or comments with positive ones;
- attempting to convince the person to change in some way;
- using phrasing that is directive, similar to giving orders.

When I said to Ami, "You are Mommy's good little helper," although my comment was positive and I had no need or motive to try to change her behavior, I put myself in a superior position in three ways. First, I labeled her as a "good little helper." Perhaps she had some other motive for clearing the table, such as hoping that I'd buy her some candy later. (She might even feel guilty that I think she's so good, knowing her own hidden motives.) Second, I made myself superior by calling her, "Mommy's helper" instead of both of us being partners in the effort. Third, I've stated my opinion as fact, with no options for her to see our roles differently. In response, I believe her passive smile and downcast eyes reflected her acceptance of a subservient role. She may now be more likely to become dependent on my approval.

The second problem with traditional methods of encouragement is that we are frequently prompting instant resistance to what we say. In response to our saying, "You have such a strong will!" Someone in the midst of a struggle with addiction is likely to instantly and emphatically say, "No, I don't!" More efforts to convince the person will only harden the resistance.

Whenever others perceive us as trying to get them to change, it prompts defensive mechanisms that take them straight to "surrender, flight, or fight." Power struggle takes over, and they won't even be able to hear what we are saying.

How Can Our Efforts to Encourage Others Be More Effective?

When I said to Ami, "I like it when we clear the table together," there was no superiority or traditional praise stated as fact. I spoke to her as an equal, simply telling her how I felt about clearing the table with her. And her response was clear and strong about how much she loved helping me.

Although in this case I was not trying to encourage her, it seems her emotional response was likely to have the effect of increasing her motivation to help the next time. And it came spontaneously from her, not from any goal or intention on my part. This is key.

Scientists studying defensive mechanisms in the brain show that while most of us can get defensive instantly, if what we say prompts a person to respond by accessing some feeling, such as safety or sadness, perhaps a memory of feeling personal strength or integrity, or even a sliver of hope—they can drop their defenses instantly.

It makes sense, then, that when we are talking to someone who is in a serious struggle with addiction—or any destructive habit—the first step in talking with the person is to let go of the need to help her or him. This is essential because having an attitude of helping others puts us in that superior role, with power differentials at play that can easily cause defensiveness.

Second, instead of moving in fast to encourage the person, we need to start where they are, not where we want them to be. Asking questions is often a crucial part. For example, if a loved one in rehab says, "I don't think I can do this, I feel like giving up," we might ask, "How afraid are you that you'll give up?" Or "Do you feel like you still have any determination or desire left to get through this, or have you given up completely?" This may feel like a completely scary question to ask, but until people who are struggling name their worst fears, those fears are like an anchor pulling them under.

In response to such questions, the person will often stop and think instead of responding defensively, ultimately finding some hope or strength inside that had been temporarily overpowered by their fear or despair. If their response expresses only defeat, we can then give feedback, subjectively, and share our reactions. It's like telling our own story without needing to control the outcome.

For example, we might say, "When I hear you saying that you have no hope of having the strength to get through this. But I remember that horrible work situation you got through that went on for several years, and you came out better than you went into it. So, it seems to me that your addiction and all the shame you've felt about it has made you forget how much strength you can have. I still have a lot of faith in the core of your strength and ability to get through this; and I also know that no matter how much I want it for you, the choice has to come from you."

We can also make a prediction, "If you don't look for that strength, I think it's more likely you will give up. If you look inside and find it again, I think you'll have much more ability to get through it, like in the past, and come out even stronger."

This scenario demonstrates saying each thing subjectively, without giving opinion as fact or being superior or directive with advice. The steps include: (1) asking questions with genuine curiosity—remaining neutral, not leading, (2) giving honest feedback—staying neutral, without judgment, (3) expressing your own thoughts, feelings and beliefs—with feeling, but without convincing, and (4) making a prediction about how you see the potential consequences the person might have for various choices—neutral, not controlling or punitive. Ironically, we are no longer encouraging the person overtly, like cheerleaders. We are simply telling them what we think, feel, and believe. The person now has the opportunity, without expectation or pressure, to find the information in what we have said that might provide encouragement.

As we change our ideas about what encouragement is and talk with, not to, those in need of our support, we can contribute—with less effort and much greater skill—to a process that can be healing and empowering. During this process others will be able to access their own sources of strength. ▼

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