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# How to Ask for Help

By Doreen Stern, Ph.D.

“I encourage everyone to reach out for help; there are always people wanting to support others at a time like this,” Jeremy Pivor wrote in a recent *Washington Post* opinion piece.<sup>1</sup> He was referring to the isolation caused by the coronavirus pandemic. He knows what it’s like because he has had to self-isolate to safeguard his health.

Sixteen years ago, when he was 12, Pivor was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor. Since then, he’s undergone two surgeries, chemotherapy, radiation and now experimental immunotherapy. Thus, he knows about uncertainty, fear and putting his life on hold:

I had to accept that I could not do a lot of activities I was used to. The longer this continued, the more isolated I felt. I sank into depression. It felt like a black hole I couldn’t climb out of. When I realized I was not able to get myself out, I reached out to my closest family members and friends. Talking openly about my feelings as well as starting medication helped me manage my depression.<sup>2</sup>

Whether you’re blue like Pivor was, or scared about how long the current circumstances will continue, or irritated by the many adjustments working from home requires, his advice applies to you. Because today’s situation is hard.

Ask for help.

It’ll make you feel better. You’ll be able to form closer relationships with people. It’ll reduce your stress. And you’ll likely gain an enhanced sense of control over your life.

## ROADBLOCKS TO ASKING FOR HELP

As I wave my arms as an “Ask for Help” cheerleader, I imagine that some of your backs are stiffening. Your faces are scowling. Your eyes are saying, “Never.”



I understand.

People often think that asking for help is akin to admitting defeat. “No, I can’t do it myself: I’m not smart enough, not tech-savvy enough, not enough overall. Besides, I don’t like being rejected.”

These are normal feelings. Most of us have them when we contemplate asking for help. Many of us retreat because we don’t want to look stupid, inept or needy. Most of all, we don’t want to be rejected—to hear someone say, “Who, me? Help you? Not on your life!”

Those are realistic concerns, since functional MRIs reveal that the human brain experiences social stings as if they were physical blows. Social psychologist Dr. Heidi Grant claims this is an evolutionary adaptation to protect us. “It’s because pain—physical and social—is an important signal in our quest for survival. It alerts us that something is wrong, that we have injured either our bodies or our connections to others, both of which have been, throughout most of human history, essential for staying alive.”<sup>3</sup>

Yet there are ways to circumvent these fears to ask for the assistance you need.

## HOW TO ASK FOR HELP

I'm going to go out on a limb here; I'm going to share the techniques I use regularly. They've worked for me. They may or may not work for you, which is fine. As time has gone by, I've come to realize there are few absolute rules about how to handle interpersonal relationships.

I do recommend courtesy, honesty and sincerity. Aside from that, I believe each of us must develop techniques that align with our values and uniqueness. Nonetheless, I suggest three simple steps:

1. **Identify the problem you have, the help you want and why.** What are you trying to accomplish and where are the holes? What kind of help do you need to get the job done, whether it's acquiring toilet paper, figuring out the best background for a video conference or managing your drooping stock portfolio?
2. **Identify whom you can ask for help to solve your problem.** Identify your preferred helper. I'll call her or him Person 1. Reach out by text, email, video call, phone or letter. Frame your request in the clearest terms possible. Let the person know your time frame, and tell them why you chose them. For instance, here's what I texted today to a college student who lives in my high-rise condominium. (Note that I'm going to pay this person and have done so in the past.)

Hey John. I'm writing to ask for help setting up my go-to-sleep device cause I think you're a whiz at figuring out tough things. Without a set schedule I've been staying up half the night.

The sound I want is piano music. I'd like it to start at 10:15 pm and last for an hour. I'd like the bright light to go on at 10:15 pm, too, and then grow dim until both the light and sound go off at 11:15.

I wonder if I may leave the device and operating manual in front of your door now—or later, if that's better? (I'll leave it in a cloth bag.)

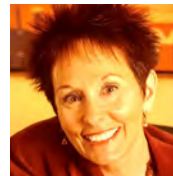
With my thanks — Doreen

3. **Detach from the outcome.** Whether the person says yes or no has little to do with you. Instead, it has everything to do with them. What's on their agenda? Does your project align with their personal goals? Can they spare the time and mental bandwidth? So don't take their not being able to help you as a rejection. Rather, see it as information. Thank them anyway. Then go back to identifying another prospect, keeping in mind that you might need to identify a Person 3, 4 or 5. Maybe even more.

## SUMMARY

I used to have this tongue-in-cheek motto: "When the going gets tough, the tough get manicures." No more. Here in Connecticut, where there's a stay-at-home order in place, manicures are out for the foreseeable future.

Now I say, "When the going gets tough, the tough ask for help." I suggest you do the same. Because no one will know you need help unless you tell them. I believe doing so will make you braver. Soon you'll be able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, knowing we're stronger together. ■



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## ENDNOTES

- 1 Pivor, J. "Living with brain cancer has prepared me for coronavirus." *Washington Post*, March 22, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/living-with-brain-cancer-has-prepared-me-for-coronavirus/2020/03/21/Te-a885b4-6930-11ea-abef-020f086a3fab\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/living-with-brain-cancer-has-prepared-me-for-coronavirus/2020/03/21/Te-a885b4-6930-11ea-abef-020f086a3fab_story.html) (accessed April 17, 2020).
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Grant, H. 2018. *Reinforcements: How to Get People to Help You*. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press.