

SHUT UP AND LISTEN—PODCAST #8 --TEXT

When a friend or loved one has a problem, it's natural for us to want to help and to find a solution. However, it turns out that most of the time, trying to “fix” the problem only makes it worse. Men tend to do this with women a lot—responding to a woman’s distress with “solutions.” More often than not, the woman then gets irritated, the man feels blamed for his good intentions, and a spiral of misunderstanding ensues.

Let me say first that the wish to help someone is obviously a good thing. But when such help begins with phrases like “Why don't you ...” or “I think you should ...” or “Maybe you could ...” the result is usually problematic.

The problem arises from the fact that the wish to help is rarely simply an expression of altruism. More often than not, our wish to help *also* stems from our own discomfort tolerating the other person's distress or suffering. In other words, the impulse we have to "fix" very often comes from the fixer's personal difficulty with just sitting and tolerating the other person's suffering. The fixer's own buttons get pushed—but he or she doesn't know that--and instead acts out by trying to get rid of feelings of distress in the other person.

For example, let's imagine that you are someone who can't stand to feel sad—for your own reasons, having to do with your own past, you really hate—or maybe even fear—feeling too much sadness, or grief, or depression. Now, a friend or loved one comes to you grieving the loss of a

relationship, or the death of a someone close to them, or being fired from a job, or losing a competition of some kind. That person is down in the dumps, sad, morose, maybe melancholic. And let's say that you have a normal amount of empathy for people who are important to you—hopefully you do. But by definition, empathy means feeling what someone else feels. So, you are in a position of having to feel the other person's sadness and grief.

This can be very very difficult for you. It's incendiary. Because—remember-- you might be the type of person who works hard NOT to feel sad or blue. And now, as a result of your empathy, normally a GOOD thing, you're suddenly flooded with this other person's grim feelings. What do you do? Well, you are inclined to do what you

always do, what all of us always do, when faced with feelings that feel dangerous or burdensome—you try to get rid of them. You want to get away from them. You try to stamp them out. But the way this comes out is through trying to stamp out, to get rid of, these painful feelings *in the other person*. WE all do this sometimes. We try to fix the other person, to get that person to stop feeling these things that are being shared with us—and that are triggering us.

In other words we are trying to solve our own internal problem by fixing the other person's problem. We try to get rid of the other person's pain in order to *relieve ourselves* of its burdens. Offering suggestions is one common strategy for doing this.

Now consider the experience of the person who was originally distressed or suffering to begin with. Very often, such a person experiences his or her suffering as reflecting something bad about them, or that their distress is likely to be burdensome to others. These are common self-critical judgments that people feel about themselves when they have problems. So, this person finally manages to share his or her pain with someone who then--out of their OWN anxiety--tries to fix the problem.

The chemistry couldn't be worse.

The person complaining feels that he or she ***is*** burdening the listener, who just seems to want to get rid of their problem as quickly as possible.

Maybe, the complainer feels, I shouldn't have these problems to begin with. Maybe I shouldn't

expect that anyone will be really interested in what I feel. The result is that the complainer feels misunderstood, rejected, and discounted.

The empathy and compassion that you pride yourself on having become your enemy when your vicarious experience of someone's suffering is hard for you to tolerate. Some people can't tolerate sadness. For many others, the most toxic feeling is helplessness. When faced with a loved one who feels helpless, it's then extremely difficult to **NOT** jump in with various solutions—all of which are unconscious designed to eliminate feelings of helplessness in the other person and, therefore, in oneself. At the end of the day, such a strategy is usually counterproductive.

As I mentioned earlier, men in our culture are especially prone to be "fixers." They grow up with

the sense that they're responsible for others, {especially for women}, and THAT includes feeling responsible for their emotional, as well as physical, well-being. Men are supposed to be "in control" and the protector and, thus, when someone they care about is suffering, it triggers an ancient reflex in men to do something about it — namely, to fix it. ***In fact, helplessness is something that men are especially allergic to, since it seems to violate the cultural expectation that men are supposed to always be in control.***

If truth be known, in general, men aren't socialized to easily tolerate a range of feelings, -- that is feelings OTHER than anger.—feelings like fear, worry, loss, sadness, in addition to helplessness, difficult for men to simply let themselves feel without doing something about it. Men are trained to go out of their way to stamp

out such feelings. When they appear in others, well—those have to be stamped out too. Thus we get The Fixer.

If giving someone solutions isn't a good idea, then what is? The simple answer is: listen. That's right. Just listen. Be curious and receptive and attempt, first and foremost, to understand the other person's experience. Tolerate their discomfort and the discomfort that that causes you. Most of us grew up in families where such simple curiosity and listening were the exceptions and not the rule. But here's a universal fact: When we feel seen and understood, we feel better and no longer alone. We have the new and comforting experience that our feelings matter, that *we're important enough* to matter. Being understood is intrinsically healing.

The lesson, then from all this is simple: Just shut up and listen!