

Please Try This at Home

Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

Getting What You Want in Relationships

What kinds of persuasion do you use to get what you want from the important people in your life? Are you as effective at getting them to respond to you as you could be? Let's use these three questions to find out:

1. You're heading for the hills with your best bud and he starts going down a different route than you would have chosen. Which are you more likely to say?
 - A. We should go my way. Clearly, it takes less time.
 - B. Stopping for all the lights on this road really stresses me out. Would you mind going another way? I think I'd enjoy the drive a lot more and be in a better mood when we arrive.
2. Your significant other complains to customer service in an aggressive, angry tone that makes you embarrassed to be associated with her. Do you say:
 - A. Why do you have to be so rude to people? Civilized people don't behave that way.
 - B. When you are short with strangers who haven't been rude to you, I feel embarrassed because my dad would always yell at us if we didn't try kindness with people before getting angry. When I'm around, would you mind starting out polite before getting assertive? I'd feel a lot calmer if you'd do that for me.
3. You just lost your job and your mom keeps telling you about how successful all the kids of her other friends are. Would you say:
 - A. Parents are supposed to support their kids, not rub their failures in their faces.
 - B. While I'm trying to get a job, it would really help if you could tell me about any opportunities you hear about, rather than talking about how other people are doing.

Obviously, Option A responses are all more direct and are most likely said from a place of frustration, while Option B responses are longer, include more feeling words, and sound more polite or, to some personalities, sound passive and wimpy. So you're probably guessing that, as a touchy-feely therapist type, I'm gonna say, "Being polite is always more effective so be polite more." Um...not quite. There are deeper forces at work here than just politeness and they may help you to unravel some of the frustrations you may have experienced in getting the important people in your life to hear your needs and wants and respond well to them.

"Can't You See I'm Right?" vs. "Can You Help Me Out Here?"

The main difference between the A and B responses is in the kind of authority or truth that they refer to in order to get their point across. Option A responses imply that, external to the relationship, there is an absolute truth about what is right for that particular situation and that we have a better understanding of that truth than the other person does. The word "clearly" in Question 1 implies that there is *one* right route, not several possible good ones, and that we know that and the other person doesn't. For Question 2, "civilized people don't" implies that we understand "civilization" better than the other person. "Parents are supposed to" implies the same kind of thing for Question 3. So with each of these statements, we are, in effect, saying, "I

know what is right better than you do. You should see my superior reasoning as compared to your own perspective and yield to my superiority.”

Do you see the problem with appealing to the authority of what is “right” when the conversation is about a *relationship* dynamic or decision, as opposed to a non-relationship-focused debate about academics, politics, ethics, or something? In order to give us what we want (a stoplight-free route, a polite customer service interaction, a supportive conversation in a tough time), the other person has to accept the implication that they are in fact wrong or inferior to us. And really, how many people are going to be all fired up to listen to our point and meet our needs when they have to declare themselves wrong and inferior to do so? They’re much more likely to retort with their *own* version of “I’m right and superior and you’re wrong and inferior” just to save face. Appeals to “rightness” within *relationship* just invite the other person to attack back in self defense.

Meanwhile, Option B responses appeal to a different kind of authority or truth: the strength and care within the relationship itself. The “I’d feel stressed, so would you mind” language of Question 1 implies, “As my friend, I believe that you care about my experience enough to do me a favor, just because it would help me, not because it’s somehow ‘right’.” Question 2’s reference to a childhood experience implies, “Both of us had different experiences, neither is necessarily superior. Based on your care for me, can you help me not feel embarrassed?” The “it would really help” language of Question 3 implies a trust in the fact that what mom actually wants is to be helpful, rather than mean, and that she’d be willing to change to do so. All three of these are really saying, “Not because I’m right or superior, but because I trust that you care about me and that you are a helpful person, could you do me a favor?”

When another person hears this kind of appeal, it’s a different set up. This time, if they listen to our request and respond, they get to see themselves as a caring, helpful, good friend/parent/partner. If they don’t respond to us with this kind of request and choose to ignore us or give an angry retort, they have to accept the fact that they are being buttheaded, which is a hard thing to swallow if they see themselves doing that over and over. This approach makes hearing and responding to your needs a win-win for them because they get to feel helpful and good for doing so. Probably more effective, huh?

Why We Attack When It’s Not Effective

So why do we so often find ourselves trying to get the people who are the most important to us, within the most intimate relationships we’ve got, to do what we want by repeatedly implying, “I’m right and superior, you’re wrong and inferior, so now do what I want”? Why is that so much easier to do than coming to them as an equal and asking for help out of trust in the fact that they care for us?

Well, because just about all of us have had previous experiences, either in this relationship or another one, where we have vulnerably asked someone to meet a need, only to have the other person ignore us or shut us down. And boy, does it hurt to be shut down in a vulnerable place! It’s much easier to come out guns blazing from a place of supposed strength and superiority, all prepared for the argument, than to risk being hurt that way again. The only problem with this defensive, strong-feeling approach is that, as we’ve seen above, “guns blazing superiority” tends to elicit arguments and resentment from the people we love, rather than listening and need-meeting. If we’re particularly overbearing and persuasive, we might get our way temporarily by getting the people we love to feel stupid and inferior, but if we keep that up long term, we either make them so small in their own eyes and ours that they are no longer strong

enough to help us feel protected and partnered-with, or they eventually retaliate against our oppression and sever the relationship.

So I'm afraid the only long-term way to get the people we love to respond well to our needs and wants is to risk some vulnerability and directly ask for their help with what we want, rather than attacking them with our "rightness." Of course, if we've been attacking each other with our competitive rightness and superiority for awhile, shifting to asking for help with what we need out of trust in the other's care for us may take some time and effort. The other person would have to notice for a pretty long stretch—probably at least 40 or more days—that we are refusing to attack or blame them and are consistently asking for help instead. But when they finally do figure out that we have *both* refused to attack with competitive superiority *and* have opened ourselves up to helping them when they ask for help, rather than attacking, some pretty darned awesome things can happen. Needs and wants can finally get heard and answered. Much connection and healing can follow!

Five Steps toward Effective Relational Persuasion

If you'd like to take a shot at making your strategies of persuasion in relationship more effective, give these five things a try:

1. Pay close attention to the next five tense conversations you have with the other person. See if you can identify the times in which you tried to use your being right or superior to them to get what you wanted.
2. After each tense conversation, in a journal or notebook, write down what you actually wanted from the person in that moment and what you might have said to ask directly for help with what you wanted. Often, these requests can be put into the sentence form: "When _____ happens, I feel _____. Could you help me during these times by doing _____ instead?"
3. Next time you notice yourself beginning to feel tense in a conversation, ask the person, "Could I have a minute to think before I respond to you?" Use that pause in the conversation to find a statement that expresses to the other person what you are feeling and needing from them in that moment, rather than the attack that first came to mind. Use the "When...I feel...could you" format above if it's helpful.
4. If the person responds well, great! If not, just continue to repeat your need/want statement in a gentle tone as the other person comes up with angry statements or reasons why they are right. See if you can simply repeat your need/want statement gently until the other person runs out of comebacks and finally hears you.
5. Try this for at least 60 days, until the other person has had a chance to see that you are consistently asking directly for what you need rather than attacking them or competing with them. It's very likely that you will notice a change in the way they respond to you between day 40 and 60 of this experiment.

If the other person continues to attack you and refuses to help with any of your requests after 60 days, it's probably time to get some professional help to see if other kinds of relationship skills might change your interactions for the better, or if there is something in the other person that is preventing positive change. I know that's a super scary reality to face—I've had to face that in important relationships several times—but it is sure better to know that, mourn it, and have the information you need to decide what to do from there, than to be hurt and frustrated forever.

If you or someone you know would like help with relationship skills or discerning whether another person is capable of changing, feel free to call me at 303-931-4284 for a free 20-minute consultation or email info@jenniferdiebel.com.

Thanks for reading!

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